

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

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**August 2011**

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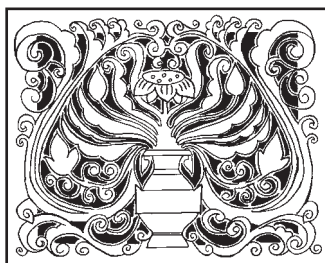


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Vol. 116, No. 8  
August 2011



Amrita Kalasha

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*



## Self-identification

August 2011  
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ॐ कोऽयमात्मेति वयमुपास्महे कतरः स आत्मा । येन वा पश्यति येन वा शृणोति येन वा गन्धानाजिघ्रति येन वा वाचं व्याकरोति येन वा स्वादु चास्वादु च विजानाति ॥

Om! Which is It that we worship as this Self? Which of the two is the Self? Is it that by which one sees, and by which one hears; also, by which one smells odour, and by which one utters speech, and by which one tastes the sweet or the sour?

(*Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.1.1)

स वा अयमात्मा ब्रह्म विज्ञानमयो मनोमयः प्राणमयश्चक्षुर्मयः श्रोत्रमयः पृथिवीमय आपोमयो वायुमय आकाशमयस्तेजोमयोऽतेजोमयः काममयोऽकाममयः क्रोधमयोऽक्रोधमयो धर्ममयोऽधर्ममयः सर्वमयस्तद्वदेतदिदमयोऽदोमय इति यथाकारी यथाचारी तथा भवति साधुकारी साधुर्भवति पापकारी पापो भवति पुण्यः पुण्येन कर्मणा भवति पापः पापेन । अथो खल्वाहुः काममय एवायं पुरुष इति स यथाकामो भवति तत्क्रतुर्भवति यत्क्रतुर्भवति तत्कर्म कुरुते यत्कर्म कुरुते तदभिसंपद्यते ॥

That Atman is indeed Brahman, as also identified with the intellect, the mind and the *prana*, with the eyes and ears, with earth, water, air, and the *akasha*, space, with fire, and what is other than fire, with desire and the absence of desire, with anger and the absence of anger, with dharma and adharma, with everything—identified, in fact, with this (what is perceived) and with that (what is inferred). As it does and acts, so it becomes; by doing good it becomes good, and by doing evil it becomes evil—it becomes virtuous through good acts and vicious through evil acts. Others, however, say, ‘The Atman is identified with desire alone. What it desires, it resolves; what it resolves, it works out; and what it works out, it attains.’

(*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.5)

# THIS MONTH

God dwells in the world outside us as well as in our inner, personal worlds. But it is the puny sense of self which clouds our vision of **The Habitat of the Divine**.



Swami Prabhavananda, founder Minister-in-charge, Vedanta Society of Southern California, reminisces about his guru in **My Master, Swami Brahmananda**. This article is a compilation by

Gopal Stavig, a dedicated member of the Society.

One of the dominant characteristics of Swami Vivekananda was his concern and plans to raise India's poor. Swami Tathagatananda, Minister-in-charge, Vedanta Society of New York, highlights **Swami Vivekananda's Concern for Common Humanity**.

Dr M Sivaramkrishna, former head of the department of English at Osmania University, Hyderabad, continues his exploration of the Great Master's unmistakable influence on contemporary world literature in **The Many-splendoured Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta – XI**.

For centuries Indian culture had influenced many Asian countries, and vestiges of it are still present in some of their languages. William Page, a retired professor of English from



Thammasat University, Bangkok, presents a first-hand experience of **Indian Influences on the Thai Language**.

Prof. Vijaya Kumar Murty, chair of the department of mathematics at the University of Toronto, and trustee of the Vedanta Society of Toronto, underlines the crucial role of **Tradition and Innovation in Spiritual Life**.

**The Middle Path of the Buddha and the Bhagavadgita** draws parallels between the teachings of two great traditions. The author, Dr Rajeshri Trivedi, is lecturer in philosophy at Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda.

Concluding his article **Natha Pantha: Order of the Primordial Shiva**, Dr Satish Kapoor, ex-British Council scholar and secretary of Dayanand Institutions, Solapur, delineates the impact of the great Natha yogis on Hindu as well as Muslim sects in medieval society.



The use of the word *putra* in the Atharva and Yajur Vedas reflects the importance given to childcare by the Aryan society. Kamalika Mazumder, MA in Ancient History and Culture and MPhil in History, Calcutta University, continues her exploration of the **Significance of the Term *Putra* in Vedic Literature**.



## *The Habitat of the Divine*

**W**E LIVE IN TWO WORLDS: the external and the internal. Both are vast and complex. True, each individual lives in his or her own world, but these personal worlds are included in the internal world as well. Depending on the line of vision and preference, some say that the internal world is embedded in the external world. Others aver that the external world, in its entirety, exists within the vaster internal. These two worlds, however, are synchronized in a peculiar way as they are perpetually struggling against each other. These struggles are responsible for the rise of a mind-boggling variety of life and in turn this variety of life keeps struggling for survival.

Struggle means pain. Buddha says: '*Sarvam dukkham dukkham*; everything is painful, painful.' Even the little pleasures we experience are surrounded and dominated by pain. Yet, in this fleeting world of pleasure we keep seeking for more to try to shut out pain. These pleasures may bring pain to others, and we have to suffer the retribution.

Moreover, nothing happens according to our will. The control of these two worlds is not and was never in our hands. Our bodies, senses, *pranas*, minds have a will of their own and do what they want. Is this then the plan of creation? Swami Vivekananda, as the young Narendranath, once declared: 'The plan of the universe is devilish, I could have created a better world.' And most of us would concur with his assessment. But who bothers about our plans when everybody has their own. Every person, however dull,

has a plan for a better world. And it is good that none of us is called forward, for if all the different plans that accord with our likes and dislikes were implemented, it would create more confusion and conflict resulting in the annihilation of the world. Sri Ramakrishna gives the final verdict: 'Is the world such a small thing that you think you can help it?'

How much do we know of the inner workings of the external and the internal worlds? We have innumerable desires that start innocuously and later grow into a conflagration. This increases restlessness, and we work all the more to be caught in even greater desires and actions. Acharya Shankara cryptically teaches that from *avidya*, ignorance, arises kama, desire, and this gives rise to action. This bondage is contingent on another factor: the self. The self is the closest of all things and, paradoxically, the least known. These devils of *avidya*, kama, and karma come in and create a 'devilish' world. Hence, there is nothing wrong with the world, but there is something seriously amiss with us.


Religion was blamed, all through, to be world-negating, gloomy, morbid, and formulated by dyspeptics for dyspeptics. Further, religionists are accused of shunning the struggles and the pains inherent in life because they do not know what pleasure is. But the fact is that those who want to affirm the world mostly affirm themselves. They are not able to see others' hunger, poverty, misery, or even a different point of view, religious or otherwise. Their affirmation is always a selective denial. As it is

degrading to the human soul to seek chimerical pleasure, it is equally degrading to hug pain. Both have to be transcended, and it is this that Vedanta teaches not just by affirming the world but by deifying it. The ordinary ideas of self and world are to be transcended.

Every religion speaks of living a detached life in the world. Sri Ramakrishna says that the boat should be in the water, not the water in the boat. Detachment does not mean laziness; it means constant work without hankering for results. It prepares the ground for the real detachment and maturity that comes when, according to the scriptures, one perceives the connection between the internal and the external worlds. Today this connection is, thankfully and inevitably, also highlighted by science, with all its force and logic. In Vedantic scriptures this unifying vision involves an overarching reality, not in a neutral but in an all-pervading manner. Real spirituality does not make one renounce or enjoy or suffer the world, real spirituality simply deifies the world.

Every natural phenomenon is guided and presided over by deities, which are different aspects or 'functions' of the same godhead. Sri Ramakrishna's parable elucidates this import: With great effort a brahmana had made a beautiful garden. Once a cow entered and began cropping the plants. The brahmana gave the cow such a blow that it died. Now he was seized with fear, 'Alas, I, a brahmana, have killed a cow, which is a great sin'. He had read a little of Vedanta and remembered that the sense-organs derive their power of functioning from particular gods; for example, the eye derived its sight from the sun god, the ear its hearing from the wind god, the hand its movements from Indra, and so on. The brahmana now recollected those words and thought, 'It is then not I who has killed the cow. The hand was moved by Indra; it is therefore

Indra who has killed the cow.' The brahmana felt relieved at this argument. The sin of cow-killing arrived to enter the brahmana's body but the latter said, 'Go away, you have no place here; Indra has killed the cow.' The sin went to Indra in heaven, who was perplexed and asked the sin to wait till he clarified things. He descended to earth in human form; he then entered the brahmana's garden and began praising it. The brahmana swelled with pride and took all the credit. When they arrived at the spot where the dead cow lay, Indra asked, 'Who did this?' The brahmana, who all the while was saying 'I did this and I did that', was at a loss. Indra then scolded him and said, 'Ah, hypocrite, you claim that you have done whatever is good in the garden but that the killing of the cow alone was done by me! Here is your sin of cow-killing; take it.' Then the sin entered the brahmana's body.

The self, bound to the world through ignorance, desire, and karma, is the one that gives such excuses. When this empirical self is transcended, the two worlds are seen to be guided and presided over by innumerable divinities, with their counterparts in each and every single phenomenon, either internal or external. One now discovers that the pains, pleasures, and struggles had a purpose. All our plans about improving the world were just prattle. God has his own plan, and it is perfect. Finally, we understand that there are no separate deities but only God, who has become apparently divided into deities within the internal and the external worlds. Swamiji, in his mature years, used to often quote this verse from the Bhagavadgita: 'Even in this life they have conquered relativity whose minds are firmly fixed upon the sameness, for God is pure and the same to all; therefore such are said to be living in God.' The same Swamiji, who later experienced the one all-pervading Reality, worked hard to show us all a way to that Reality. 

# My Master, Swami Brahmananda

Swami Prabhavananda

SWAMI PRABHAVANANDA (1893–1976) first met his guru Swami Brahmananda (1863–1922) in 1911 and joined the Belur monastery of the Ramakrishna Order in December 1914. While in India he had a number of opportunities to be in Swami Brahmananda's holy company, until 1923 when he was destined by the Order for the United States.

## ***With Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swamiji***

Om Hari Om. Him I bow down to, the perfect guru, who is absorbed in the bliss of Brahman, who can bestow that bliss upon others, who is free from earthly bondage, who is the Self of highest knowledge, who is beyond life's sweet and bitter, who is untouched by evil, of whom the scriptures describe his nature saying, 'That Thou Art'. Changeless, pure, eternal, one without a second, the witness of all the mind's moods and motions. How shall thought compass and tongue describe Him? Om Tat Sat. Om *shanti, shanti, shanti*; peace, peace, peace.

This describes my master about whom I am going to speak, though the mind cannot compass or words cannot express. In his presence my own

---

These reminiscences of Swami Brahmananda have been compiled by Gopal Stavig from twenty-four of Swami Prabhavananda's lectures transcribed by Swami Krishnananda (1904–97). These lectures were delivered at the Vedanta Society of Southern California between 1948 and 1976. Mostly unpublished and minimally edited here, these reminiscences include a Sunday oral presentation entitled 'My Master' by Swami Prabhavananda on 24 January 1971.

experience had been that there is no question that would arise in our minds. Is there a God? Can we see him? Such questions would not arise. I have asked my brother disciples and they said the same thing. If you had been in the presence of a God-man who lived in that blissful consciousness, like I had the privilege to, you would feel that God is. He could transmit spirituality through silence; that was the power in him. The disciples of Ramakrishna that I met were the embodiments of their own teachings. Religion is something they could transmit to others.

Wherever he [Swami Brahmananda] would go there would be joy and festivity. It would be a unique experience. And we would be renewed in spirit, would feel purified. There was that one ideal placed before us: realize God, see him, talk to him, be his companion for eternity, realize your union with him.

It is really very difficult to talk about Swami Brahmananda. In order that a great illumined soul can be understood, one has to be illumined oneself. The appreciation is possible only when you have attained to the same height of realization. We were young then; we thought we knew everything. But as we grow older in experience, we begin to get a little glimpse, we see the vastness, the greatness, the impossibility to explain or express what he stood for.

One time my master, whom we all lovingly used to call Maharaj, told me that when bad thoughts arose in him, he was afraid to approach Sri Ramakrishna. Then Thakur said: 'Come here. Hold out your tongue,' and he wrote something on it. Maharaj said: 'Then all that was gone.' I



told him: 'When it comes to Sri Ramakrishna, he did everything for you, but when it comes to us, you only scold us.' Then he said: 'No. I see that Thakur is doing everything for you.' Three times he repeated that.

Sri Ramakrishna asked Rakhal to gently massage his feet. Rakhal came from a very rich family, and he thought that it is the duty of servants to massage another person and so he replied: 'Sir, I cannot do it.' Then Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Why don't you just touch my feet with your hands?' And then he touched his feet and saw the Divine Mother in the form of a little girl going around him.

He lived with Sri Ramakrishna as father and son. If you ever go to Dakshineswar where Sri Ramakrishna lived, you will find there are two beds; in the higher bed Sri Ramakrishna slept and in the lower bed Rakhal slept.

At one time Sri Ramakrishna said to Rakhal: 'Prepare a betel leaf for me.' 'Oh, I do not know how to do it.' Then Latu Maharaj said: 'Why don't you follow the guru's words?' Rakhal replied: 'Why don't you do it?' So they fought. Sri Ramakrishna asked Ramlal, his nephew: 'Who is the greater devotee?' He said: 'Of course Rakhal is a greater devotee.' Then Latu said: 'Rakhal is a greater devotee who would not obey the guru's orders.' Then Sri Ramakrishna explained to him: 'He did not lose his temper before his guru, but you lost your temper.' From that day on Latu Maharaj never lost his temper before anybody; he had such control over himself.

Sri Ramakrishna taught Swamiji and Maharaj many kinds of spiritual disciplines, and to no other disciples. Now they are forgotten. Rakhal came to look after Sri Ramakrishna, but Rakhal reached a stage when Sri Ramakrishna had to look after him.

You see Sri Ramakrishna in a picture for example, but some disciples saw him transfigured

into many forms. Swami Saradananda came to him [Swami Brahmananda] and said: 'Maharaj, there is a statue of Sri Ramakrishna. Would you please come and look at it.' Then he said: 'Which form? I have seen him transfigured in[to] many forms.' Then he explained to him: 'The form you see in the picture.' He said: 'Oh yes.' Maharaj approved the statue that was in Benares. Unfortunately it was stained, and they have painted it, but it does not look the same.

He wrote a little book called *The Words of the Master*, and that was the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna as he learned from him. In this connection I am reminded of what he told us about the book that he wrote. He said that when Sri Ramakrishna was living, at one time, he wanted to write down what he was saying, and Sri Ramakrishna saw him taking notes and asked: 'What are you doing?' 'Oh, I am taking notes of what you are saying.' 'Oh no, do not do that, listen to what I am saying,' Maharaj told us: 'I forgot many things. But now I get these teachings, I think of them, and he comes and tells me again what to write.' Those teachings that you find in that little book, *The Words of the Master*, were really directly heard from Sri Ramakrishna, and he just jotted them down again.

This I have heard from another disciple who was present at the time. Swami Vivekananda called a meeting of his brother disciples and they were together, and he already had written certain rules for the conduct of the monastery. He asked every disciple to read them and give their opinion. All the brothers liked them, but some criticized one or two of the rules, and the discussion went on. Maharaj was keeping silent and then Swamiji asked: 'Raja, how is it that you have not said anything. Don't you like the rules?' He said: 'No Swamiji, I don't like them.' Then, what did Swamiji do? He tore up the rules and threw them in the wastebasket.

This is a very interesting story that I heard this time when I went to India. Swamiji and Maharaj were seated together, and Swamiji was talking about how to organize the Order. Then, suddenly, Maharaj made a little remark. As soon as he said that, Swamiji took out his notebook and wrote it down, what Maharaj had said. Then Maharaj told him: 'Swamiji, I did not consider that matter, it just came out of me. You must not pay attention to that.' You see, Swamiji knew that what came out of Maharaj were the words of Sri Ramakrishna.

At Belur Math one time Swami Premananda was telling Maharaj that Swamiji said to him [in Bengali]: 'I have become the purifier of the fallen ones.' And Maharaj replied: 'I have also become the purifier of the fallen ones.'

### **Grace Unconditional**

As Christ has said: 'Ye have not chosen me, I have chosen you.' And this I have seen with Maharaj, my master; all his disciples will tell you that at the very first meeting he accepted you. I have taken many of my friends to him and they could not see anything. So the disciple has to be ready. Yet, these very people, strange as it may sound, come to us to become disciples. Maharaj made very few disciples, only a little over one hundred. Those whom he accepted, he accepted at the very first meeting. And it is, I will say, a grace unconditional.

This reminds me of a brother disciple of mine who is in St Louis, Swami Satprakashananda. He told me that Maharaj asked him: 'Have you a room for me?' He did not understand him, so he replied: 'Yes Maharaj, we made a place for you.' Maharaj said: 'No, I do not mean that. I mean here [in your heart]; have you room for me?' Then he understood. But again he thought it would take a long time to get initiation from Maharaj, he might have to wait for years. Thus, he decided to go to the Holy Mother. As he went half the distance, he got dysentery, he could not

proceed; hence, he had to come back. At long last he had to take initiation from Maharaj.

There was a schoolteacher of mine, Sharat Sen, who told me: 'I understand you go to Maharaj. Would you take me to him?' So I took him with me and introduced him to Maharaj. He wanted certain preliminary instructions, which Maharaj gave to him. Then Maharaj asked me: 'Don't you want to ask for instructions?' I said: 'No Maharaj', because I found fulfillment in him. I thought there is no other as great—mother, father, or friend—so what I have to get from him? Later, when we were going back on a boat, Sharat Sen scolded me: 'He wanted to give you instructions, why didn't you accept them?' Then I said: 'All right, I'll go back.' Consequently, the next day I came back. Maharaj asked: 'Why have you come back?' 'Yes Maharaj, I want instructions.' Then he gave me my very first instructions and gave me beads. His chief disciple Swami Shankarananda had the beads strung together. He asked me to get a bell to hang around the neck of his pet calf that he was very fond of. He saved the calf from the hands of some people who were going to butcher it. That was I think *Guru-dakshina*, the fee for the guru, which is the custom.

Before becoming a monastic I went to see Maharaj at Kankhal without getting his written permission. His secretary and disciple Swami Shankarananda, who later became the president of the Ramakrishna Order, was also there, and he [Swami Brahmananda] told him to make room for this young brahmachari. Four of us were together in one large room, including Swami Madhavananda, who later also became the president of the Ramakrishna Order. One day Maharaj came to see how we were situated. He said: 'Too bad; four of you have to stay in one room.' Then he made the remark: 'Fifty sadhus, holy men, can live under one blanket, but in one kingdom two kings cannot live!'

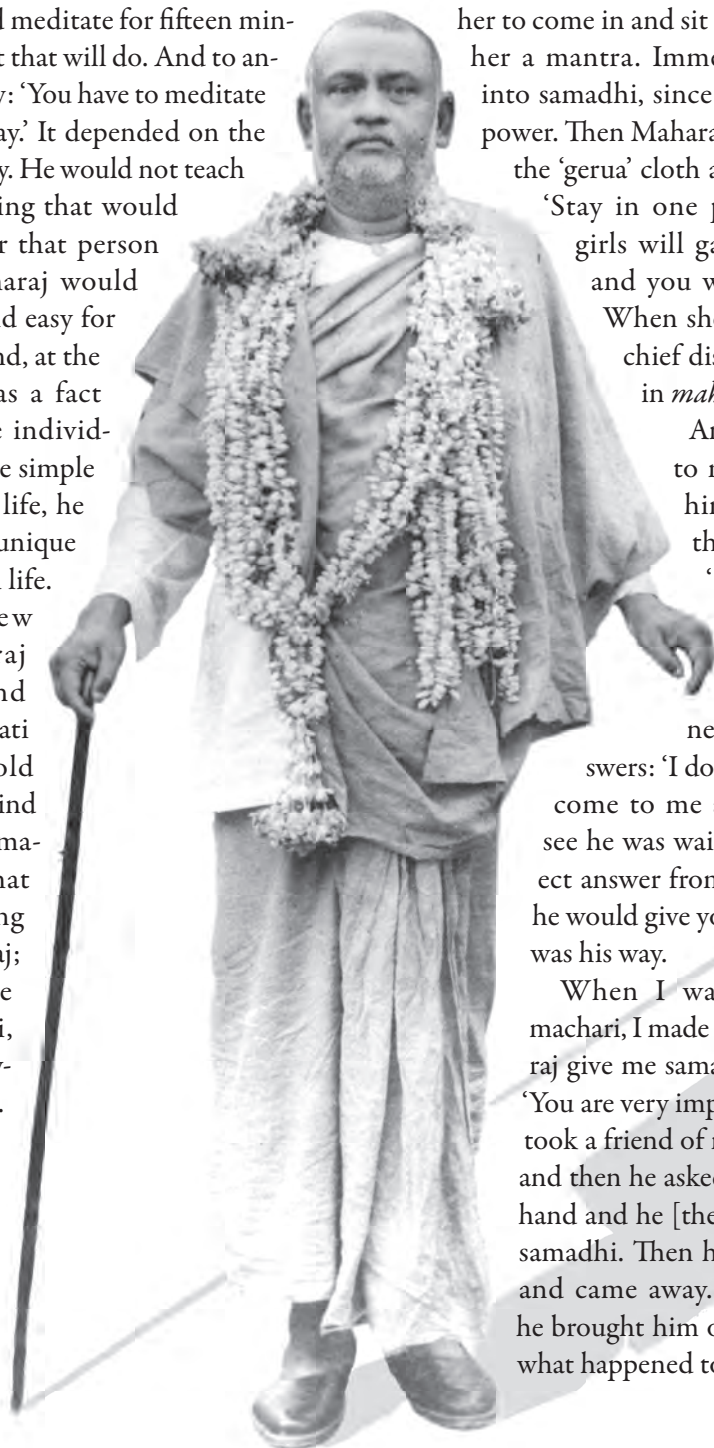
In the case of Maharaj we have seen how he would teach each disciple according to his capacity, to what he could do; he would not say anything impossible. I have heard him say to some disciples to sit and meditate for fifteen minutes a day and that that will do. And to another he would say: 'You have to meditate sixteen hours a day.' It depended on the individual capacity. He would not teach anybody something that would be impossible for that person to practise. Maharaj would make it simple and easy for each individual and, at the same time, it was a fact that if that same individual practised those simple truths during his life, he was bound to get unique results in spiritual life.

After a few months Maharaj decided to send me to the Mayavati Ashrama. He told me to keep my mind high like the Himalayas. During that time I was feeling lonely for Maharaj; as a result I came directly to Puri, where he was staying at the time. Maharaj had the ability to give samadhi just by a touch. There was a fourteen-year-old girl who had a dream of Maha-

raj, and thus she came to the Udbodhan Office. She was sent by Swami Saradananda at an odd time to Maharaj, who was resting at Balaram Bose's house. Maharaj got up and asked her to come in and sit down, and he gave her a mantra. Immediately she went into samadhi, since Maharaj had that power. Then Maharaj asked her to take the 'gerua' cloth and become a nun. 'Stay in one place, and young girls will gather around you and you will initiate them.' When she passed away, her chief disciple said she was in *mahasamadhi*.

Another thing comes to my mind. You ask him something and then he would say: 'Oh, wait, wait; come and see me tomorrow.' You come to him the next day, then he answers: 'I do not feel good, you come to me another day.' You see he was waiting to get the direct answer from the Lord, before he would give you his answer. That was his way.

When I was a young brahmachari, I made the request: 'Maharaj give me samadhi.' And he said: 'You are very impatient my boy.' He took a friend of mine to the library and then he asked him to touch his hand and he [the friend] went into samadhi. Then he locked the door and came away. After two hours he brought him out. I do not know what happened to him [afterwards].





Another time my master told me: 'You have the grace of God, you have the grace of your guru, you have the grace of the devotees of God, but for the grace of one, you will be ruined.' I said: 'What is the grace of one?' He said: 'Your own mind.'

His own disciples did not understand him; his brother disciples understood him. When we were sitting at his feet as disciples, we saw what reverence and respect his brother disciples showed him. When we would feel that majestic greatness in him, he would do something, say something, and make us laugh and forget that. If that feeling continued in us, we could not give him the personal service that we had the privilege to give. He would be like one of us. He would bring himself down to our plane and give us the lift from there. You know, it is very strange, we could not understand it. For instance, he was seated and we were there, talking perhaps. And then we thought he was a little unmindful. There was a gaze in his eyes as if he was gazing at the infinite and, at the same time, he was answering us also. Later he said he had the vision of Christ, he had talked with him. We did not see him going into samadhi, so how would we understand such phenomena? You see, he lived in that blissful consciousness and, at the same time, he was the head of the Ramakrishna Order, the vast organization, and he carried on the duties of the Order.

I got this letter from a monk who is older than me, but was junior in the monastery. At one time he came to Maharaj and said: 'I cannot meditate, my mind is restless; please do something for me.' He replied: 'Brother Hari, Swami Turiyananda, has practised many spiritual disciplines, he has performed austerities all his life, he is the one you must go to.' So, he goes to him and Swami Turiyananda tells him: 'I am at Maharaj's door living with him to receive his grace.

You go back to him and receive his grace.' He returns and Maharaj says: 'You know there must be a proper recipient.' This young monk's answer was wonderful, he said: 'Maharaj, you can give that supreme treasure, you have the power to do that, you can make a recipient fit.' Then Maharaj smiled and said: 'All right, follow what you are doing and you will achieve it.'

### ***Last Meeting and After***

I was sent to Madras, and after a time, when Maharaj arrived, there was a singer with him. He sang this song that was later translated by Swami Ashokananda, who was the head of the San Francisco centre. It went:

All my sorrow has been lifted by seeing Thee,  
What boundless grace is Thine,  
My heart has drunk pure nectar,  
and is soothed.  
When I do not have Thee,  
all things seem empty,  
And the sun, and the moon, and the stars,  
lose their light.  
Companion of my soul,  
there is none like Thee,  
An ocean of love swells within  
when I remember Thee.  
Stay Thou with me, day and night,  
that my life may have its Lord,  
And keep me ever in the shadow of Thy feet,  
in life and in death.

I saw Maharaj in samadhi in Madras. There was a cot and a seat placed there. He looked at me and said: 'You seat me.' And then I took his legs, and for a long time he was in a meditation posture and then [went] into samadhi. At that time a picture was taken.

When I was in the Madras monastery, I was with Maharaj about fourteen hours a day while he was there. A professor from Colombo in Ceylon, who later became a disciple of Maharaj and

a swami of the Order, was staying with us. He did a great service to the cause, a very intellectual man; he translated books of Swamiji into Tamil and he opened many schools and colleges all over Ceylon. These schools have been taken away by the government and unfortunately he died prematurely.

Another event occurred at the Students' Home dedication in Madras. Maharaj was to make the dedication, and I was behind to protect him from the crowd. We sent an invitation to many people including Annie Besant, the head of the Theosophical Society. When she came I showed great respect to her and moved away, and she leaned on Maharaj.

There is another incident I heard from others that I wish to tell you. A disciple of Maharaj was giving him service for a long time, and then suddenly he got smallpox. Hence, he was taken to the hospital and Swami Ramakrishnananda used to go every day and see him. He would beg Swami Ramakrishnananda: 'Please ask Maharaj to come and stand at the door, I want to see him before I die.' When he told Maharaj, he paid no attention to that. And then, after he died, Swami Ramakrishnananda told Maharaj: 'This boy attended you with such care for such a long time, and he wanted to see you before he died, and you did not go.' Maharaj responded: 'How do you know I did not go? How do you know I did not go?'

When one attains the highest samadhi, what we call *nirvikalpa* samadhi, one reaches that unitary consciousness. Then, when the yogi comes back, there is not the universe of matter but the universe of spirit. Their eyes have become transformed, their vision is not physical, hence they see God in everything. They live merged, soaked, as it were, in the bliss of God. I have seen how Maharaj would have to struggle sometimes to control that samadhi. That state of conscious-

ness was the normal state for him. To be unconscious of the world, of course that is samadhi. He would control [it] in order that he could live and teach us. Often I have seen certain marks, preliminary signs one goes through, or one can see expressed physically, before one plunges into that transcendental consciousness. I have witnessed many times when such signs would be marked in him; he would get up and walk out. Just think of that. You and I are struggling hard to reach that state, and he would shun that state, as it were.


When he was leaving Madras, he said as I prostrated before him: 'I feel so bad to leave you here.' When he sent a card, he used to sign it 'Yours affably, Brahmananda.' And then in English, on the side, he wrote: 'I miss you very much.' After I arrived at Bhubaneswar, he went away to Calcutta. There he attained *mahasamadhi* and I never saw his physical body any more.

Maharaj initiated Tara, an actress of the theatre who had heard about Sri Ramakrishna from Girish Ghosh. You will find Tara's description of Maharaj and his fatherly love in the book I have written on my master. I came from Madras to Bhubaneswar, where she had a house in order to associate with the monks. When she found out that I was a disciple of Maharaj, she wanted to meet me. At first I hesitated a little—she was an old lady at that time. She insisted on touching my feet, and I tell you, I felt such soothing influence that I knew she was pure.

There was a young swami who informed me of one incident. He told me what a bad thing he had done, and there was a meeting of the trustees. The case was brought up, and they had to unanimously pass the resolution to expel this young monk. Maharaj had to agree, he was the president, but he did not press the matter; this was done in the afternoon. Next morning Maharaj dressed early in the morning and came to meet

the secretary, Swami Saradananda, who looked at him and asked: 'Maharaj, why at this hour are you all dressed up?' 'Well,' he said, 'you know what you did yesterday was all right because he brings disgrace to our Order. But I am going to resign my presidentship; I'll take a house somewhere and I will have that boy with me.' Then Swami Saradananda replied: 'Oh Maharaj, if you want to keep him, forget the matter.' So he stayed on. And you know, when I first came back to this country in 1935, I was three days and three nights with this young swami, and what a joy he gave me, talking all of the time about Maharaj and his love for him.

Three of us were celebrating the first birthday anniversary of Maharaj after he passed away, just before I came to this country. Swami Saradananda, from the Udbodhan Office, was supposed to come and attend the ceremony. But he was busy, so he could not do it and sent a poem in Bengali, which translates as: 'On the lotus-blossom he who is dancing with Krishna, who is the leader of all mankind, and also the real true guru, Him I bow to.'

When we looked at our master what did we see? Did we see in him a Hindu monk or a Christian minister, or what? I have pondered over that many times, looking at him, and the only answer I could get within my heart was that he was a man of God, neither Hindu, nor Christian, nor Buddhist. 





# Swami Vivekananda's Concern for Common Humanity

Swami Tathagatananda

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA WAS *dhyana-siddha*, perfect in meditation. He longed to experience *nirvikalpa* samadhi and told Sri Ramakrishna he would like to remain in that state for five or six days at a time, but the latter replied: 'Fie on you! You are such a highly qualified aspirant, and you speak like this! I took you to be a huge banyan tree under which thousands would find shelter, and here you are craving for personal emancipation!' <sup>1</sup> The Master had a special mission for Swamiji: 'As Naren's work was to be in the form of compassion and service to humanity, he could not remain in *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* if he was to do it.' <sup>2</sup> The Master himself refused to remain forever absorbed in this state. During his last days, Sri Ramakrishna called Naren to his side. As he was unable to speak, he wrote on a piece of paper: 'Narendra will teach others' (1.182). When Swamiji protested the Master told him: 'You shall *have* to do it' (*ibid.*).

One day at the Kashipur garden house Narendranath attained *nirvikalpa* samadhi, the ultimate non-dual experience. Immediately after that the Master told him: 'Now the Mother has shown you all. But this realization of yours shall be locked up for the present, and the key will remain with me. When you will have finished doing Mother's work, this treasure will again be yours.' <sup>3</sup> Sri Ramakrishna then turned to his other disciples and predicted: 'The time will come when he will shake the world to its foundations through the strength of his intellectual and spiritual powers. I have prayed that the Di-

vine Mother may keep this realization of the Absolute veiled from Naren. There is much work to be done by him. But this veil is *so thin, so very thin* that it may give way at any time.' <sup>4</sup>

A few days before his *mahasamadhi*, the Master again called Swamiji to his side. Fixing his gaze on him, Sri Ramakrishna entered into deep meditation. Swamiji felt a subtle powerful force entering his body and lost all outer consciousness. Emerging from this state he found the Master weeping. He asked him why, and was told: 'O Naren, today I have given you my all and have become a Fakir, a penniless beggar. By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you; only after that will you go where you came from' (1.182).

## Great Compassion

Travelling throughout India Swamiji lived with the wealthy and the poor. He saw that despite their helplessness and misery, the poorest Indians continued to preserve their simplicity, unselfishness, and integrity of character. But their obvious wretched condition of life and barren future made his mind restless with sorrow. Swamiji's mind was absorbed in finding a solution to alleviate their condition. His own experience of *nirvikalpa* samadhi gave him the strength to fulfil it. The concept of seeing divinity within and through all objects has existed in India since Vedic times, when sages realized the Absolute. But endless debates over the superiority of either theory or practice never

allowed the concept to be put into practice. In the modern times Vivekananda's compassionate heart removed all doubts in the minds of those who listened to him: 'He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary.'<sup>5</sup> 'May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God that I believe in, the sum total of all souls—and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship' (5.137).

Swami Vivekananda wanted Vedanta to reach the daily life of people. 'The abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life,'<sup>6</sup> he urged. Between 1890 and 1893 he wandered throughout the length and breadth of his motherland. His own experience taught him that God dwells in the heart of all, both high and low, and it was his desire to improve India's economic and social conditions—the reason for his unique meditation at Kanyakumari. He proceeded to Kanyakumari in December 1892. After worshipping the deity Kanyakumari, the Divine Mother as a virgin, he swam nearly two hundred and twenty yards of shark-infested waters to reach the two rocks 'sanctified by the blessed feet (Shripada) of the Divine Mother' (1.340). He sat down on India's last rock and was lost in meditation for three days and nights, from 24 to 26 December. Before this no saint in India's monastic culture ever sat in meditation to ponder over the deplorable conditions of the motherland, seeking inspiration to solve the problem of uplifting India's masses from poverty. In Kanyakumari he had a rare spiritual experience of inestimable worth and became, just to say, a 'condensed India' (1.344). He also received the divine inspiration to embark on the journey to the West:

He gazed over the waters through a mist of tears. His heart went out to the Master and to the Mother in prayer. From this moment his life was consecrated to the service of India, but particularly to the service of her outcast Narayanas, her starving Narayanas, her millions of oppressed Narayanas. To him, in this hour, even the direct experience of Brahman in the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, and the bliss attending it, became subservient to the overwhelming desire to give himself utterly for the good of the Indian people. His soul was caught up in the vision of Narayana Himself, the Lord of the Universe, transcendent, yet immanent in all beings—whose boundless love makes no distinction between high and low, pure and vile, rich and poor. To him religion was no longer a special province of human endeavour: it embraced the whole scheme of things—the Vedas, the sages, asceticism and meditation, the Supreme Vision, *and* the people, their lives, their hopes, their misery and poverty and sorrows. He saw that religion, without concern for the poor and suffering, was so much dry straw. Yes indeed, at Kanyakumari the Swami became the patriot and prophet in one! (1.343–4).

Swamiji said that on the rock at Kanyakumari he was able to find what he had been seeking for years, that which was present in his mind during his wanderings throughout India. A little over a year after this experience, on 19 March 1894, he wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda:

In view of all this, specially of the poverty and ignorance, I got no sleep. At Cape Comorin, sitting in Mother Kumari's temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock, I hit upon a plan: We are so many sannyasis wandering about, and teaching the people metaphysics—it is all madness. Did not our Master use to say, 'An empty stomach is no good for religion'? That those poor people are leading the life of brutes, is simply due to ignorance. We have for all ages

been sucking their blood and trampling them underfoot (1,342).

Throughout his entire life, Swamiji spent every ounce of energy and shed every drop of blood to improve the condition of the world in general and of India in particular.

### ***In North India***

While wandering in northern India Swamiji discovered some aging, frail, and penniless sadhus living in extremely austere conditions in the Haridwar region at the foothills of the Himalayas. The troubling vision of these sadhus stuck in his mind. Towards the beginning of 1901, when Swamiji was at Belur and still haunted by this memory, he asked Swami Kalyanananda: 'Look here, Kalyan, can you do something for the sick and ailing monks around the Hrishikesh-Haridwar belt? There is none to look after them. Go and devote yourself to their service.'<sup>7</sup> Inspired by this heartfelt request Kalyanananda established in June 1901 a rudimentary Sevashrama, home of service, at Kankhal, approximately five miles south of the Haridwar-Rishikesh region, to care for these monks. Another disciple of Swamiji, Swami Nischayananda, came to help him in 1903. Together they established one of the Mission's largest Sevashramas in that area.

Once, as Swamiji headed towards Almora in northern India, he lay down as he almost fainted for lack of food. Swami Akhandananda, who was travelling with him, ran about looking for some food or water to revive him. A fakir named Zulfikar Ali lived in a hut near the cemetery. Happening to see the plight of the swami he offered him a single ripe cucumber from his garden. Swamiji ate it and felt energized. Seven years later, after returning from the West, Swamiji was honoured at a reception and taken in procession through the town. From the

midst of the crowd he happened to see the fakir peering at him. The poor man did not recognize him, until Swamiji had him brought to him and reminded him of how he had once saved his life with a cucumber. Happy to meet him again he thanked him and 'gave him some money in token of his grateful remembrance'.<sup>8</sup>

Here we are tempted to include another incident in North India that was narrated by one of Swamiji's disciples. It took place at Tari Ghat, which was then a railway station for travellers to Ghazipur. One scorching summer afternoon Swamiji got off at this station; he was holding a third-class ticket for a station some distance away. This was all he had; he did not even have a water-pot. Observing him deprived and dressed in a simple gerua cloak, the porter did not allow him to wait inside the station. So Swamiji sat on the hot ground with his back against a post designated for third-class passengers outside the station and waited for the train. He was desperately thirsty and hungry.

Of the motley crowd assembled there, we need mention only a middle-aged man of the North Indian trading-caste, a Baniya, who sat on a cotton mat a little way off under the shelter of the shed, almost opposite the Swami. Recognizing the Swami's starving condition, he had made merry at his expense as they journeyed in the same compartment the previous night. And when they stopped at different stations and the Swami, who was suffering intensely from thirst, was unable to obtain water from the water-bearers because he had no money to pay for it, the Baniya bought water to satisfy his own thirst and, as he drank it, taunted the Swami, saying, 'See here, my good man, what nice water this is! ... Why don't you earn money as I do, and have a good time of it?' ... In his opinion it was only right that the sannyasi should starve, and so, when they both alighted at Tari Ghat, he took considerable pains to make it clear to



the Swami, by means of arguments, illustrations and taunts, that he [the Swami] was getting just what he deserved; for the Swami was in the burning sun whilst the Baniya had seated himself in the shade. 'Look here,' he [the Baniya] began again with a derisive smile curling his lips, 'what nice Puris and Laddus I am eating! You do not care to earn money, so you have to rest content with a parched throat and empty stomach, and the bare ground to sit on!' The Swami looked on calmly, not a muscle of his face moved.

Presently there appeared one of the local inhabitants carrying a bundle and a tumbler in his right hand, a mat under his left arm, and an earthen jug of water in his left hand. He hurriedly spread the mat in a clean spot, put on it the things he was carrying, and called to the Swami, 'Do come, Babaji, and take the food I have brought for you.' The Swami was surprised beyond words. What did this mean? Who was this newcomer? The jeering Baniya's look was changed into one of blank amazement. The new-

comer kept on insisting, 'Come on, Babaji, you must come and eat the food.' 'I am afraid you are making a mistake, my friend,' said the Swami: 'perhaps you are taking me for somebody else. I do not remember having ever met you.' But the other cried out, 'No, no, you are the very Babaji I have seen.' 'What do you mean?' asked the Swami, his curiosity fully aroused, while his jeering companion sat gaping at the scene. 'Where have you seen me?' The man replied, 'Why, I am a sweetmeat vendor and was having my usual nap after my noon meal. And I dreamt that Shri Ramji was pointing you out to me and telling me that He was pained to see you without food from the day before, and that I should get up instantly, prepare some Puris and curry, and bring them to you at the railway station, with some sweetmeats, nice cold water, and a mat for you to sit on. I woke up, but thinking it was only a dream I turned on my side and slept again. But Shri Ramji, in His infinite graciousness, came to me again and actually pushed me to make me get up and do as He had said. I quickly prepared

*Swami Vivekananda in Kashmir, 1897*



some Puris and curry, and, taking some sweets which I had prepared this morning, some cold water and a mat from my shop, I ran here direct and recognized you at once from a distance. Now do come and have your meal while it is fresh. You must be very hungry.' One can imagine the Swami's feelings at this time. With all his heart the Swami thanked his simple host, while tears of love flowed from his eyes; but the kind man protested saying, 'No, no, Babaji! Do not thank me. It is all the will of Shri Ramji.' The jeering Baniya was quite taken aback. Begging the Swami's pardon for the ill words he had used towards him, he took the dust of his feet (1.348-9).

Swamiji had to suffer much. His desire to educate Indian women may be traced to the suicide of his beloved sister Yogenbala at the house of her in-laws. 'A telegram had come from his brother telling of the suicide of one of his sisters' (1.252), the news of which reached him at the garden house of Lala Badri Shah, in Almora. Nearly ten years later, on 12 December 1899, he wrote to Mrs Ole Bull of that bitter loss that awakened him to the problems of India's women: 'The peace, the quiet I am seeking, I never found. I went years ago to the Himalayas, never to come back; and my sister committed suicide, the news reached me there, and that weak heart flung me off from that prospect of peace.'<sup>9</sup>

Whenever an opportunity arose to lead a life of intense sadhana in the Himalayas he was denied the opportunity, either through his selflessness in serving others or through his own illness, which prevented him from staying in the mountains. His worst illness occurred when he was at Rishikesh with a few of his brother-monks towards the end of 1890:

The Swami had high fever and diphtheria. He grew worse and worse until his brethren became extremely fearful. His pulse sank low as

time went on, and his body became cold. Then his pulse seemed to have stopped: it appeared that his last moments had come. He lay unconscious on a couple of rough blankets laid on the ground. His brothers, overwhelmed with grief and anxiety, did not know what to do. They lost all hope and started to weep. ...

After a while he opened his eyes and attempted to speak. One of the brother-disciples put his ear near the Swami's mouth and heard the words: 'Cheer up, my boys, I shall not die.' Gradually he recovered. Later he told them that, during that apparently unconscious state, he had seen that he had a particular mission in the world to fulfil, and that until he had accomplished that mission, he would have no rest. Indeed, his brother-disciples noticed such a superabundant spiritual energy welling up in him that it seemed that he could hardly contain it. He was restless to find a proper field for its expression.<sup>10</sup>

That vision put an end to his desire to perform intense sadhana in the Himalayas.

(To be continued)

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# ***The Many-splendoured Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta – XI***

**Dr M Sivaramkrishna**

**A**S WE ARE ON THE EVE of the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda in 2013–14, we notice an increasing recognition of his role in both national and international contexts. Scholars of various persuasions and personal agenda seem to find his significance transcending the religious or theological areas. One significant area is Indian nationalist discourse, which increasingly seems not just interested in but convinced about his role in national awakening.

## ***Indian Ethos for Comprehensive Well-being***

One can find this evident even in those who subscribe to secularism of various hues, both in India and abroad. If globalization is a buzzword, there is also a remarkable attitude of harmonizing cultural variations. Such studies go to the extent of regarding India as an ‘antidote’ to globalization, which is seen as pure westernization or—if such a drastic simplification can be made—Americanization. Patrick French, in his balanced portrait of present India, for instance, observes: ‘It would be easy to assume American hegemony in the late twentieth century, or European hegemony in the late nineteenth century, means occidental supremacy must continue. The assumption that the rest of humanity will acclimatize to western precept as happened in various forms over recent centuries, no longer holds true.’<sup>1</sup> Therefore, India need not be seen carrying a ‘reputation as a hothouse for nerds, geeks, techies, and assorted data fiends’ (ibid.).

In such misperceived ethos he asks:

Does the devotion to the extended family offer a template to other countries, where family structures have broken down, and is it the Indian business family the supreme embodiment of this structure? Why does Indian identity remain so powerful even while globalization is altering the country profoundly? How does it feel to be part of a freshly minted meritocracy, where genuine social mobility is possible in parts of the country for the first time in history? Is India today—diverse, democratic, dissenting—potentially a unique strategic ally for the West and a possible antidote to the rise of stricter global powers like China and Russia? (ibid.).

I have quoted somewhat elaborately to highlight the fact that the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda tradition has achieved an answer to this question in terms of both institutional and individual perspectives. It has achieved, in its own way, the goals of social and economic welfare and ethical and spiritual well-being as the inseparable twins of life and consciousness.

Therefore, when the Great Master and Swamiji figure in the nationalist discourse, it is not as more ‘antidotes’ but as adaptors of various attitudes for achieving the goals. It is this fact that now looms large on the horizon on the eve of the 150 years of Swamiji’s and 175 years of the Great Master’s advent. It is this larger perspective of assimilation of plurality of life-skills, both secular and sacred, underlying Swamiji’s religion that is consciously or unconsciously manifesting itself.



To begin with, in their reader-friendly yet uncompromisingly frank assessment of the Indian character in *The Indian: Portrait of a People*, the distinguished psychoanalyst and writer Sudhir Kakar and Katharina Kakar—an expert on comparative religion, Indian art, and other areas—refer to Swamiji in the context of ‘the flexible Hindu’ who is now, by and large, suspected as ‘an outpost of globalization’. Pointing out the risks involved in such apparent flexibility, they write: ‘He [the Hindu nationalist] may belittle the flexible Hindu’s religiosity as carnivalesque, look down on him as someone who promiscuously adorns himself with religious stylistic scraps from all parts of the world and thus “weakens” the Hindu faith and dilutes Indian identity. Yet, constrained by the narrative of Hindu openness and tolerance, he cannot exclude the flexible Hindu from the Hindu fold.’<sup>2</sup>

This is ‘exclusion’, which dogs the footsteps of the so-called flexible—may one add secular intellectuals and activists—from figures like Vivekananda. The Kakars put it tersely: ‘Such an exclusion would also be a betrayal of one of Hindu nationalism’s greatest icons, the activist monk Swami Vivekananda (ibid.).’ And they quote Swamiji’s assertion of the significance of practicing an activist spirit of global religion that does not bulldoze the unique identity of any religion. Swamiji says in the passage the authors cite: ‘We not only tolerate but we Hindus accept every religion, praying in the mosque of Mohammedans, worshipping before the fire of Zoroastrians and kneeling before the cross of the Christians, knowing that all the religions, from the lowest fetishism [to the highest absolutism], mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association’ (149).

This is a healthy rebuttal of the scholarly views that either accept and interpret Swamiji

as a champion of Hindutva or declare him to be a bland and blank image of ‘a global religion’ with all identities dissolved, seeking to establish a stew of anonymity. The identity of a religion need not necessarily be dissolved into facelessness in trying to achieve harmony.

### ***The New Indian Thought***

A comparable but vastly different, and comprehensive, view of Swamiji’s contribution is found in *Awakening: The Story of the Bengal Renaissance*, an incisive, substantial study in this area by Professor Subrata Dasgupta, who is director of the Institute of Cognitive Science at Louisiana University—‘He has worked,’ it is noted in the blurb, ‘for many years on Bengal Renaissance’.<sup>3</sup>

This is clearly a comprehensive study that, of course, passes by what exactly is Renaissance: whether a straight-jacketed paradigm imported by the British or, as Jonathan Sachs in his *The End of Poverty* traces, it could also be brought by the East India Corporates—the first colonizers—or whether it underwent inevitable mutations in the Indian contexts. Moreover, there is a tendency to categorize the Renaissance figures as the educated elite—in Calcutta—and the illiterates in the villages. Perhaps, the largely illiterate villager Ramakrishna negates this tempting categorization.

There is also the odd fact that figures like Rammohan Roy are historical, while Ramakrishna has inspired, puzzled, and often maddened scholars of various affiliations and continues to be wrestled with in religious studies. He meets the intense spiritual hunger of quite a significant number of seekers. Professor Dasgupta writes that: ‘A barely literary mystic, Ramakrishna’s homespun Hindu philosophy, inspired an intellectual named Narendranath Datta to metamorphose into a monk Viveka-

nanda, who preached at home and abroad a new form of Vedantism, which in turn inspired an Irish woman Margaret Noble to adopt his faith and become a Hindu Nivedita' (4).

Commenting on the historical significance of the Ramakrishna movement, Professor Dasgupta says: 'For centuries, Christian missionaries had ventured into India to proselytize on behalf of their church and their religion, and to convert. Vivekananda initiated a Hindu missionary system of a kind never known before—to spread the gospel of the Vedanta in the West. The awakening called the Bengal Renaissance was turned on its head: here was not a case of India being moulded by western ideas but the West encountering a new brand of Indian thought' (320).

Very fascinatingly phrased; but it suggests equivocation: Is there a distinct process called proselytization in Hinduism? Does it have a missionary spirit? Is 'missionary' used in the Christian sense? And, how come that Ramakrishna is of much more complexity to the western scholar considering his illiteracy and rustic simplicity? If it is a real missionary movement, the Ramakrishna Order is certainly condemned to be a derivative model of Christian missions! This point is negated by the Professor and raises a very important issue: Is the western Renaissance a universally valid model, which modernized all other nations that were beneficiaries of corresponding attitudes to various aspects of another culture and civilization? I am puzzled by my own ignorance in this area and find studies of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta poised between incompatible factors. This is a far more complex issue that raises the fundamental question of what Renaissance in the Indian studies means. Is it an eclipse of religion as it happened in the West or a revitalising of it? If it has also resulted in secularism of the brand studied—if

not practised religiously—in our academic corridors, then one can ignore the power and thrust of religion at one's peril.

In this respect *Awakening: The Story of the Bengal Renaissance* is a substantial contribution to recent assessments of Swamiji. Dasgupta quotes Swamiji to suggest that his is the 'fundamental idea of a universal religion', and 'from this will come self-belief' (307). This, in its turn, creates uplift of the masses and ends gender bias. In short, says the Professor: 'This was a modern, new Hinduism for a country awakening to nationalism' (ibid.).

Professor Dasgupta's study is also refreshing in the way in which it portrays the relation between the rustic Ramakrishna and the highly intellectual Narendranath. Ramakrishna's way of teaching was something radically at variance with the academic's cerebral expositions Narendranath was familiar with. Professor Dasgupta says Ramakrishna 'was a master at drawing upon stories and parables from everyday life, examples from common-sense experience, of physical reality and those "folk" teachings, his simplification of religion, and his charisma as a mystic led to his extraordinary popularity as a teacher. This was Hinduism reformed from within a profound response to Christianity and the highly westernized, elitist Brahma Samaj' (311).

This is a fascinating summing-up of what must have struck Narendranath in the Great Master. In fact, the insight about Hinduism of Ramakrishna as 'from within' a profound response to Christianity needs to be studied in depth. It is recorded that Ramakrishna had a vision of Christ and kept pictures related to him in his room. What were the circumstances that made this rustic mystic take to Christianity as a vital religion, the truth of which he *had* to experience, and why is it that, in spite of his authentic personal conviction, he never felt the

urge to look at conversion to that religion—there were many such in contemporary Calcutta society—are aspects needing further and more incisive study.

Perhaps, this itself is a paradigm, in terms of which one has to draw a distinction between conversion to another religion and experiencing the truth of that faith without any need for conversion. Retaining one's faith but absorbing the core of another is a need that Ramakrishna showed as imperative. No conversion is needed based on perversion flung at the other's version. It needs, of course, radical changes in our attitude to proselytization and its related aspects.


Professor Dasgupta sees Swamiji's experience of the fundamental unity of various faiths as containing the seeds of the vital harmony and unity of various forms of human knowledge itself. For Vivekananda, says Professor Dasgupta, 'this is where science entered into his discourse' (312), and Swamiji found 'common ground between science and his religion: they both sought unity in diversity. In this, he parted ways from most religions, for they tended to distinguish faith from reason' (ibid.).

There is also another related aspect that has not been explored sufficiently: if one accepts various aspects of human concern as interrelated under the canopy of unity, why should one refrain from political processes while retaining loyalty to a sage like Vivekananda? He himself, of course, declared politics as taboo. But then, there is the case of Sister Nivedita. Dasgupta says: 'She befriended such leaders of the Indian Congress Party as Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Inevitably, she drifted from the Ramakrishna Mission. Yet, she would continue to speak publicly about Vivekananda and propagate his teachings' (319).

This is too sensitive an issue, but if Swamiji

saw total unity of life and its activities, is there a possibility of religious institutions and their *functioning* seen as subject to and possibly influenced by political forces—or mutually influenced—so that these vital power corridors are imbued with and inspired by the values such institutions embody? I am not sure whether such a possibility is worth trying. Becoming a political activist did not make Nivedita drift from the Ramakrishna Mission! This is an interesting strategy worth scrutiny. The gross identification of politics with unethical power-mongering is too much of a distortion that has to be negated in theory and practice.

Indian nationalism, often Hindu nationalism, seems to be the most discussed and contested space. For instance, in an important volume published by Cambridge University Press entitled *An Intellectual History of India* (2010), there is a fascinating study on culture contact and colonial discourse with 'Germanism' as the focus in colonial Bengal, by Andrew Sartori. He sees the 'presence' of Germanic traces and suggests that this becomes 'explicit' in 'the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda complex' as studied by Brajendranath Seal. This is seen as the 'philosophical inheritor of Fichtean idealism' (80).

Let us conclude this instalment by noting the development of, shall we say, a new genre regarding Swamiji's studies. This is signalled by Mani Sankar Mukherji's study entitled *The Monk as Man: The Unknown Life of Swami Vivekananda*.<sup>4</sup> This is a fascinating saga, written with remarkable sensitivity and concern for facts. Consisting of five chapters, it is a gripping account of Swamiji's familial background, as also his strong likes: 'The Monk who Loved Tea', for instance. We have even a detailed account of Swamiji's health. But I keep the analysis of this study for my next instalment. 

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# *Indian Influences on the Thai Language*

William Page

*Scene from the Ramakien (Thai Ramayana) at Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Bangkok, c.1800*

**T**HIS IS JUST an informal collection of some interesting examples of Indian influences on the Thai language that I have stumbled upon by living in Thailand.

## ***Origin and Basic Structure***

Nobody knows for sure where the Thai people originally came from. One recent theory says they have always been in Thailand; an older theory says they came from southern China. To my untutored ear, their language sounds like a southern Chinese dialect. Like Chinese, it is a tonal language, and may originally have been monosyllabic. Thailand became a Theravada Buddhist country very early on. Its language has been strongly influenced by Sanskrit and Pali as well as regional languages like Mon and Khmer. The situation may be slightly analogous to English,

which started off as a Germanic language but later received heavy influxes from Latin and French.

The Indian influence is most obvious in the written Thai language. The spoken language changes the pronunciation of Indian-derived words to suit the Thai tongue, which has difficulty managing consonant clusters. It chops off final clusters and sometimes adds a vowel to break up others. In doing so it often makes the Indian derivation almost unrecognizable.

For instance, there is a road near my home whose name is sometimes transliterated as *Srinagarindra*, but is pronounced *Si-nakaran*; the *Dharmachakra* is called a *Thammachak*; and the name *Vishnu* is often pronounced *Wissanu*. This tendency to change the pronunciation of Indian words becomes clear when we look at the Thai pronunciation of names from the Indian classics.

The Thai version of the Ramayana is called the *Ramakien*. It is taught in Thai schools and every Thai schoolchild is familiar with the names of the main characters. However, the pronunciation changes: Dasaratha becomes Tossarot, Kaikeyi becomes Kaiyakese, and Ravana becomes Tossakan. How do we get Tossakan from Ravana? Actually Tossakan comes from Dasakanta, 'ten-necked'. Some names do not change much: Rama becomes Phra Ram, Phra being an honorific title; Sita is Nang (Lady) Sida; and Hanuman is still Hanuman; but Lakshmana's name gets truncated to Phra Lak. In the Mahabharata Yudhisthira becomes Yutissatera; Dhritarashtra becomes Taliterat; Duryodhana becomes Turayot; Krishna becomes Kissana; and Arjuna becomes Orachoon.

Such changes also occur in the Thai names for the Vedic deities, whom Theravada Buddhism honours with the title Thewadaa—Sanskrit *devata*. Brahma becomes Phra Phrom, pronounced Prah Proam; Lord Vishnu becomes Phra Wissanu; Shiva becomes Phra Siwa; and Ganesha becomes Phra Pi-Ka-Net. Phra is a high honorific title given to deities, monks, eminent personages, Buddha images, temples, and even amulets. The wide range of usages makes it impossible to translate Phra into a single English word, although in many cases 'revered' or 'venerated' might come close. Despite the dissimilarity, the word *phra* is derived from the Sanskrit *vara*, meaning excellent.

The Indian influence is striking when we turn to terms relating to the monarchy. All the kings of the current Chakri dynasty have had Rama as their official name. The present sovereign, who is highly revered by his people, is the ninth of his line: His Majesty King Rama IX, or Phra Ram Gaew in Thai. His Majesty's given name is transliterated as Bhumibol or Bhumibalo, it means 'strength of the land' and is pronounced Poomipon. He has a retinue of court brahmanas who

advise him. One of the titles of his son and heir is Rachakumarn—Rajakumara; and his ministers have the title Rachamontri—Rajamantri.

Coming to Buddhism one of the most famous Thai monks of recent times was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. His name in Thai was written as Phra Phutthathat and pronounced Prah Poota-that. Lord Buddha's title is written as Phra Phuttha Chao and pronounced Prah Poota Jow. *Phrachao* is the Thai word for 'the Lord' and is used as the name of the Christian God.

We also find the Indian influence in many Thai place names. Thailand's gigantic new airport is named Suvarnabhumi, the name the Indians gave to Southeast Asia in ancient times. Many foreign tourists have flown into Bangkok thinking they would be landing at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, only to discover to their bewilderment that everybody calls it Suwannapoom. The names of some Thai cities begin or end with *huri*, the Thai rendering of *pura*: Buriram, Petchaburi, Saraburi, Suphanburi, Chonburi, and so on. Ratchaburi is obviously related to Rajpur; Singburi means 'lion city', and Kanchanaburi means 'golden city'. There is a town named Si Racha, derived from Sri Raja; and Ayutthaya, the old capital, was intentionally named after Ayodhya. Sometimes the derivation is less obvious, as with Nakhon Si Thammarat, which comes from Nagara Sri Dharmaraja, and Nakhon Sawan, derived from Nagara Swarga. Sometimes the connection is indecipherable, as with the north-central Thai city of Phitsanulok; believe it or not, it means Vishnu-loka.

In the southern part of Bangkok there is a neighbourhood called Pahurat, populated mainly by Thais of Indian descent. I used to teach English at Bangkok's Thammasat University, and I never gave the name Pahurat a thought until one of my students gave a speech on India. 'The Indians call their country Pahurat,' she informed



*The kidnapping of Sida,  
from the Ramakien;  
centre left: Tossakan  
disguised as Ruesi [Rishi]  
Sutham woos Sida;  
centre right: Tossakan  
turns back into his normal  
aspect and makes off with  
Lady Sida;  
right: Marees [Marichi] calls  
out in Phra Ram's voice to  
entice Phra Lak out of the  
ashrama so Tossakan can  
kidnap Sida;  
bottom right: Phra Ram  
attempts to catch the  
golden deer (Marees in  
shape shifting), but suspects  
something bad and shoots  
the deer, killing Marees, who  
with his dying gasps calls  
out in Phra Ram's voice to  
trick Phra Lak*



the class. I resolved to ask her, during the question period that followed each speech, where she had unearthed from this spurious bit of information. Then it hit me: Pahurat = Bharat.

The Indian influence also occurs in personal names. I used to have female students with names like Sawitree, Savitri; Wassana, Vasana; Warunee, Varuni; Wanida, Vanita; Bussaba, Pushpa; Supatra, Subhadra; and Suchada, Sujata. Male students might be named Anand, Arun, Wasant, Kaset, Kshatriya; Wichai, Vijaya; or Dusit, Tushita, one of the Buddhist heavens.

Even the standard Thai greeting comes from India. Thais greet each other the same way Indians do, with palms pressed together and raised in a prayer-like gesture. In Thailand this gesture is called a *wai*. Instead of saying 'namaste' or 'namaskara' Thais say 'sa-wa-dee', usually transliterated *sawasdee*; it is used for both 'hello' and 'good-bye', and comes from the Sanskrit word *svasti*. Thais do sometimes say 'namaskara', pronounced 'na-ma-sa-kan', but only when greeting monks.

While the Indian influence is most obvious in formal language and expressions relating to classical literature, religion, and government, it is also seen in some of the most common Thai words. The word for 'food' is pronounced 'ah-hahn', but is spelled *ahara*. We also have a word pronounced 'khao', but it does not mean 'eat', instead it means 'rice'.

When I first arrived, I found that the word for a university teacher is pronounced 'ah-jahn', usually transliterated as *ajarn*. That is the title I was addressed by, and it usually translates as 'professor'. But what was my amazement, some time later, to discover that it is written as 'acharya'—for someone like me to presume or claim the title of acharya seemed an act of unpardonable hubris. The word for an elementary or high school teacher is almost as exalted. It is pronounced 'kru' and is derived from guru. And finally, there is a building in Bangkok with a sign in English letters identifying it as: Kuru Sapha, Guru Sabha.

Interesting influence indeed!

PB



# Tradition and Innovation in Spiritual Life

Prof. Vijaya Kumar Murty

LIFE IS FRAUGHT with uncertainties ranging from the trivial to the threatening. We deal with this fact in different ways individually and collectively. Some of the ways human society neutralizes uncertainties is through customs, rituals, observances, and by following a certain methodology. The human mind seeks certainty, stability, and permanence in every aspect of life. Thus, for the sake of social integration and continuity we hold certain beliefs and propagate them to the next generation. The dictionary meaning of the word 'tradition' is: 'A statement, belief, custom, etc., handed down by non-written (esp. oral) means from generation to generation,' and 'a long-established generally accepted practice or custom.'<sup>1</sup> What begins as a custom, ritual, or observance becomes over the course of time a tradition. There is yet another not well-known meaning of this ancient word; its Latin root is *traditio(n)*, which means 'to deliver', 'to betray'. In other words, it refers to the handing over of something and relinquishment of one's ownership or control. It may be surprising to learn that the word 'treason' is derived from the same root as 'tradition'.

On its own, the ancient meaning of the word 'tradition' seems to be the giving up and handing over of something. From this point of view, what is it that we are giving up and handing over? It is apparently the freedom of choice in certain matters, in return for membership in a certain community or tradition; we give up our freedom of choice in terms of certain beliefs, customs, and practices. According to the dictionary, tradition among Jews refers to 'an ordinance of the oral

law not in the Torah but held to have been given by God to Moses' (ibid.). For Christians it refers to 'doctrine not explicit in the Bible but held to derive from the oral teaching of Christ and the Apostles' (ibid.). Among Muslims it indicates 'a saying or act ascribed to the Prophet but not recorded in the Koran' (ibid.). These are the examples of religious traditions.

## How Traditions and Innovations Arise

Tradition is not arbitrary, nor does it develop all of a sudden. It is formulated over a period of time, and that is both its strength and weakness. Something becomes a tradition if it has stood the test of time; this is its strength. But time tends to dilute it; this is its weakness. Thus, whatever vision or idealism motivated the original custom it may become completely forgotten and invisible by the time the custom becomes a tradition. An example is the tradition amongst Hindus of not killing cows. The custom probably relates to the importance of the cow and the bull in the largely agrarian civilization. A custom that is vital to survival becomes sacrosanct and acquires a religious overtone. This particular tradition is considered one of the defining marks of being a Hindu. One may suspect that many of the religious customs of the world are of similar nature. They come into being largely for social reasons, not spiritual ones.

Through custom we may define ourselves as a community. This is especially true with religious communities. Some of them dress and eat in a particular way, build their houses and temples in a certain way, name themselves in a dis-

tinct way to thus preserve their identity. Among orthodox Jews, apart from honouring the Sabbath, men are expected to wear skull caps, dress in white shirts and black suits, and to marry. Individuals surrender their choice in personal matters in return for membership in that community. If anyone in the community challenges these traditions, he or she faces the risk of being ostracized and perhaps even excommunicated. The community feels that the individual's exercise of choice threatens the very existence of the community, which is identified and defined by its traditions.

Tradition also gives us collective memory. It may be that through the customs we remember certain great and inspiring individuals and events. Perhaps these are the individuals whose innovations have now become our customs and traditions. They are the prophets and the pathfinders, and they continue to live through the tradition.

On the other hand, 'innovation' is 'the introduction of a new thing; the alteration of something established' (ibid.). Not every change in the way of doing things can be called an innovation, just as not all customs can be called traditions. For example, suppose we try to start walking backwards; is that an innovation? What problem does it solve and what need does it fulfil? When people feel that they are benefited in some way, they start following it, even if they are mistaken about the benefit.

Therefore, while tradition demands giving up freedom in return for membership in a community, innovation introduces a new way of doing things; in other words, tradition and innovation are opposed to each other. In any healthy living system, however, both are necessary. Absolute sameness or equality leads to death, for the environment and circumstances are constantly changing; and unless the system is able to adapt itself

to the changes, it cannot survive. Conversely, if the system changes too rapidly, it becomes vulnerable and fragile. In human society tradition contains our collective memory and our core values that ensure continuity, while innovation produces the variations that ensure our survival in a changing environment. The two exist in creative tension. At times tradition gains the upper hand and society becomes more conservative. During these times it becomes very difficult to suggest anything new. At other times innovation gains the upper hand, and society undergoes a kind of revolution. Society is of course not homogeneous, so these movements of tradition and innovation may happen at different speeds and in different aspects across different sections of society. The divisions may be along multiple lines.

We belong to various communities. Traditions belong to communities and communities do overlap and are layered. For example, we belong to the community we live in and we are professionals. Perhaps we are parents and belong to a school or college community where our children study. We may belong to a political party or a religious community. We may be citizens of or identify with a certain country. More generally, we are human beings and identify with humanity. At a higher generalization, we are living beings and identify ourselves with all living beings.

This overlapping does result in a conflict. We may belong to overlapping communities that have conflicting traditions. As professionals we may have to commit many hours of work in an office, and as parents we may need to spend many hours with our children. And there are not enough hours in a day to fulfil both commitments. It is this conflict between traditions that can stimulate innovation because it forces people to ask questions. We try to harmonize



first question we can ask ourselves is: What is our motive? If it is to find suitable answers, then it has a positive function. Moreover, there is a way to ask questions. Sincere questioning tends to be creative and reverential. On the other hand, is our motive to rebel? This is a negative function and leads to more difficulties. Where do we stand if we cut the ground from under us?

our membership in two communities, and the result is innovation. In the above case perhaps one is able to arrange a flexible office schedule so that one can spend more time at home.

Tradition does not exempt us from thinking anew, but people mostly become complacent. The conflict of differing traditions wakes us up and forces us to think. We are forced to ask, 'what is the meaning of this custom or ritual? Why do we follow this and what are its benefits?' Consider, for example, the issues faced by the Indian diaspora. We see numerous instances of confused children and even more confused parents. The questions that the children are asking have not even occurred to the parents! The parents not only do not know the answers, but they even find the questions strange. How did this come about? It is because of allowing ourselves to be part of a tradition without questioning it. It is only when we question that we are able to ascertain what essential aspects of a tradition need to be maintained and preserved and what are not so essential aspects that can undergo change.

We have to be careful that in raising these questions we are not deceiving ourselves. The

That is why so many youths are confused. They reject what they have and lack the skill to acquire something new in a positive way. Some may feel that this kind of inquiry is beyond them and that it is a kind of intellectual pursuit. It is nothing of the kind. It is about the fundamentals of life. It is within the reach of everyone because it concerns everyone. These two forces of tradition and innovation are being manipulated by all of us in different degrees. This makes for a fascinating study from many points of view, but we shall discuss them in the context of spiritual life only.

### ***The Goal Is Freedom***

Swami Vivekananda says:

All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to one and the same goal. I have already tried to point out that goal. It is freedom as I understand it. Everything that we perceive around us is struggling towards freedom, from the atom to the man, from the insentient, lifeless particle of matter to the highest existence on earth, the human soul. The whole universe is in fact the result of this struggle for freedom.

In all combinations every particle is trying to go on its own way, to fly from the other particles; but the others are holding it in check. Our earth is trying to fly away from the sun, and the moon from the earth. Everything has a tendency to infinite dispersion. All that we see in the universe has for its basis this one struggle towards freedom; it is under the impulse of this tendency that the saint prays and the robber robs.<sup>2</sup>

It follows that no tradition can lead us to our ultimate spiritual goal. It may point the way and even take us a considerable distance. However, by definition, tradition represents a usurping of freedom. This is why Swamiji says: 'It is good to be born in a church, but it is bad to die there' (1.325). To be born in a church means to have the protection, nurturing, and encouragement of a tradition, which is necessary at the early stages of growth; as Sri Ramakrishna says: 'While the trees on the foot-path are young, they must be fenced around; otherwise they will be destroyed by cattle.'<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps why the Bhagavadgita says: 'He who discards the injunctions of the scriptures and acts upon the impulse of desire attains neither perfection nor happiness nor the Supreme Goal.'<sup>4</sup>

Like walls, traditions have a dual aspect: they prevent things from coming in, but also prevent us from going out. Eventually the fencing has to be removed, otherwise it will stunt the growth of the plant. This is why we find that those who move forward in spiritual life tend to speak in non-traditional terms. This going beyond tradition is not a rejection but a fulfilment. This is the language that Christ used when he spoke in non-traditional terms: 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I come not to destroy but to fulfil.'<sup>5</sup> In our times, we find Swami Vivekananda speaking in very non-traditional terms: 'You will be nearer to Heaven

through football than through the study of the Gita.'<sup>6</sup> This is not a rejection or undermining of the Gita, it is rather an assertion that we have to make ourselves fit to understand the teachings of Sri Krishna by first making ourselves a little strong in body and mind.

Looking at things in a very traditional way sometimes blinds us to the potential before us. Among those who came to see Sri Ramakrishna, how many were able to understand what he actually represented? Many saw him in a very traditional way. They thought he was a sadhu like many other sadhus teaching what was already written in the scriptures. These people could not understand that Sri Ramakrishna was the avatara of the age. A careful study of his life and teachings show how non-traditional was he. At the same time, Sri Ramakrishna respected all traditions and was careful not to disturb the faith of anyone. Let us consider a few examples of this.

Once the priest of the Radhakanta temple, while carrying the image of Krishna, slipped and fell, breaking the leg of the image. According to tradition, one cannot worship a damaged image. On the other hand, there was great sentimentality associated with the image as it had been worshipped until then, and the devout felt that it was a tangible representation of Sri Krishna himself. The question was put to pundits as to how to resolve this dilemma. They said that the traditional texts were quite clear on this point and that in no way could a damaged *pratima*, image, be worshipped. It had therefore to be consigned to the Ganga and a new image made. However, when Sri Ramakrishna was consulted, he said: 'If any one of the sons-in-law of the Rani [Rasmani] had broken his leg owing to a fall, would he have been forsaken and another person placed in his stead or would proper arrangement have been made for his treatment? Let that procedure be followed here also; let the broken parts of the



leg of the image be joined and the worship continued.<sup>7</sup> Another instance is connected with a pilgrimage to Vaidyanath, Kashi, and Vrindavan. The entire trip had been organized by Mathur Babu and there were a large number of people in the group, including Sri Ramakrishna. While going through a village on the way to the Vaidyanath temple in Deoghar they saw many poor people. Seeing their pitiable condition Sri Ramakrishna's heart was filled with compassion, and he asked Mathur to give them all some clothes, oil, and food. Mathur had planned the expedition carefully and felt that doing what Sri Ramakrishna was asking for would introduce a new and very large financial burden. He tried to explain this to Sri Ramakrishna, but could not get him to agree. Sri Ramakrishna said: 'You wretch, I will not go to your Kasi. I will remain here with them; they have none to call their own; I will not leave them behind and go' (654).

After Sri Ramakrishna directly experienced the presence of the Divine Mother and could feel her presence everywhere and at all times, his worship became transformed. Once a cat entered the temple at the time of the food offering, and Sri Ramakrishna fed it with the food meant for the deity saying: 'Wilt Thou take it, Mother?' (197). This act outraged the other priests since they saw it as a flagrant violation of traditional rules governing worship. It is important to note that Sri Ramakrishna was not trying to violate the tradition, nor was he trying to teach anyone anything or make any point. He was acting according to his own direct experience.

However, when Sri Ramakrishna observed a tradition, he did so completely. When he wanted to experience God through the Islamic perspective, he did not visit the Kali temple but lived outside a Masjid and changed his clothes and eating habits to be in tune with that tradition. When he wanted to practise the attitude

of Hanuman, he wore his cloth differently and his mannerisms also changed. It is said that there was even a physical transformation of his coccyx resembling that of the beginning of a tail! This shows the extent to which he immersed himself in the tradition he wanted to experience.

It was not only in his life but also in his teachings that Sri Ramakrishna was very non-traditional. For example, traditional teachings say that we have to give up the ego. Sri Ramakrishna advised to give up only the unripe ego.<sup>8</sup> The Vaishnava scriptures speak of compassion to living beings as an injunction to devotees, but Sri Ramakrishna said that it was arrogance to think we can show compassion to anything; the correct attitude for him was: '*Shiva jnane jiva seva*; serve the jiva knowing it to be Shiva.' In pointing these out I am not suggesting that we should have a new sect of Sri Ramakrishna. Rather, I want to draw attention to the fact that Sri Ramakrishna presented things in a very non-traditional way. Swami Vivekananda was perhaps one of the first and one of the few who understood the significance of what Sri Ramakrishna taught and represented. Once Swami Vivekananda told some friends that he could write extensively on each of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. Haramohan Mitra replied that he did not see so much depth in the Master's teachings. Swami Vivekananda told him that: 'You would have understood it, had you the brains.'<sup>9</sup>

Swamiji's idea of applying Sri Ramakrishna's concept of '*Shiva jnane jiva seva*' as the guiding principle of a monastic Order started by him was brilliant and highly non-traditional. His own brother disciples could not understand it at first. When two of Swamiji's disciples, Swamis Nischayananda and Kalyanananda, established a hospital in Haridwar and took care of the sick monks and pilgrims, they were addressed by other monks in a derogatory manner as 'sweeper

monks'. And today even the most orthodox and traditional of monasteries is including social service in its mandate.

Vedanta recognizes the need to go beyond traditions. We, as human beings, may belong to many traditions, but ultimately we need to transcend all of them in order to realize our real nature as the Atman. All traditions are approximations and as such they will conflict in some aspects. The attempt to resolve those conflicts is our spiritual struggle and what leads us to innovation. In this struggle we may be guided by scriptures, but scriptures are like maps only; though they help us, they do not take us to our destination. This is why the Upanishads speak of the Vedas becoming *aveda*, no-Vedas.<sup>10</sup> The Gita also says towards the end: 'Abandoning all forms of rites and duties, take refuge in Me alone.'<sup>11</sup> It also says: 'A Brahmana with realization has that much utility in all the Vedas as a man has in a well when there is a flood all around' (2.46).

The Upanishads constantly stress the need to question; hence, they speak in aphoristic language and ask the students to contemplate and discover the meanings by themselves. In the *Chhandogya Upanishad* a father asks his son Shvetaketu: 'O good looking one, now that you are conceited, proud of being a learned man, and immodest like this, did you ask about that instruction through which the unheard becomes heard, the unthought becomes thought, the unknown becomes known?'<sup>12</sup> The Gita commands: 'Know that through prostrations, inquiry, and service.'<sup>13</sup> Questioning is essential to spiritual life, for this reason is called the 'spiritual quest'. The *Vivekachudamani* stresses three conditions for success in spiritual life: 'A human birth, the longing for liberation, and the protecting care of a perfected sage.'<sup>14</sup> The desire to be free makes us question. This questioning

should start from where we are and not at some esoteric level; to reach God we should first try to understand ourselves and the world around. Swami Sarvagatananda told us the story of a boy from the Arya Samaj who once came to see Swami Akhandananda. The boy bluntly said: 'I don't believe in God, but I want to be good. What should I do?' Swami Akhandananda told him: 'Don't hate and don't hurt.' In the Gita Sri Krishna describes the qualities of a devotee of God, and the very first quality he states is *ad-veshta*, he who is not hateful.<sup>15</sup> The initial discipline mentioned by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutra* is ahimsa, non-injury. Thus, Swami Akhandananda's advice 'don't hate, don't hurt' captured two fundamental disciplines as taught by Sri Krishna and by Patanjali.

Sri Sarada Devi emphasized the importance of spiritual disciplines like japa; she herself did japa for the good of her disciples. 'Nevertheless, from a higher standpoint, she unequivocally decried japa as a mere mechanical process when she said, "These *mantras* and the like are nothing, my daughter; devotion is all."<sup>16</sup> Swami Sarvagatananda used to tell us that our behaviour is more important than our beliefs, our functioning is more important than our faith, and our character is more important than our convictions.

Swami Vivekananda says:

Again, we must consider, religion is a [matter of] growth, not a mass of foolish words. Two thousand years ago a man saw God. Moses saw God in a burning bush. Does what Moses did when he saw God save you? No man's seeing God can help you the least bit except that it may excite you and urge you to do the same thing. That is the whole value of the ancients' examples. Nothing more. [Just] signposts on the way. No man's eating can satisfy another man. No man's seeing God can save another man. You have to see God yourself.<sup>17</sup>

Religion is a matter of spiritual culmination. Swami Vivekananda says again: 'If you [can realise Brahman] by standing on your head, or on one foot, or by worshipping five thousand gods with three heads each—welcome to it! ... Do it any way you can! Nobody has any right to say anything. Therefore, Krishna says, if your method is better and higher, you have no business to say that another man's method is bad, however wicked you may think it' (ibid.).

In fact, we have to find out for ourselves the disciplines that are effective for us; that will build our character and bring awareness of a greater harmony and unity within us. All of these are examples of simple innovation that we need to work out for ourselves. If we embark on this journey, we shall find it the most stimulating adventure we can have. There are many things to discover that are not in books. There is a lot of opportunity to be innovative.

Swami Vivekananda declares:

Religion has just begun. The infinite ocean of spiritual truth lies before us to be worked on, to be discovered, to be brought into our lives. The world has seen thousands of prophets, and the world has yet to see millions. There were times in olden days when prophets were many in every society. The time is to come when prophets will walk through every street in every city in the world. In olden times, particular, peculiar persons were, so to speak, selected by the operations of the laws of society to become prophets. The time is coming when we shall understand that to become religious means to become a prophet, and that none can become religious until he or she becomes a prophet. We shall come to understand that the secret of religion is not being able to think and say all these thoughts; but, as the Vedas teach, to realise them, to realise newer and higher ones than have ever been realised, to discover them, bring them to society; and the study of religion should be the training to make prophets. The

schools and colleges should be training grounds for prophets. The whole universe must become prophets; and until a man becomes a prophet, religion is mockery and a byword unto him. We must see religion, feel it, realise it in a thousand times more intense a sense than that in which we see the wall. ...

The gigantic principles, the scope, the plan of religion were already discovered ages ago when man found the last words, as they are called, of the Vedas—'I am He'—that there is that One in whom this whole universe of matter and mind finds its unity, whom they call God, or Brahman, or Allah, or Jehovah, or any other name. We cannot go beyond that. The grand principle has been already mapped out for us. Our work lies in filling it in, working it out, applying it to every part of our lives. We have to work now so that every one will become a prophet. There is a great work before us (6.9–11).



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# Buddha's Middle Path and the Bhagavadgita

Dr Rajeshri Trivedi

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH of Buddhism and the ideal of *nishkama*, desireless, karma of the Bhagavadgita, are both middle paths between indulgence and austerity; between *pravritti*, revolving towards, and *nivritti*, going away from. They prescribe a steady pursuit of truth and convey the message that the realization of the highest goal of life is possible without completely renouncing the world. Both Buddha and the Gita speak of truth as not a thing to be known only intellectually, but also to be realized. Moksha and nirvana are considered *purusharthas*, human goals, whose achievement is possible here and now by following prescribed paths. These paths are essentially ethical. The individual is elevated through morality and thereafter attains spiritual perfection.

The middle path is a beacon for ordinary people, who are normally immersed in a life of action. They are unaware of the true spirit in which action should be performed in order to achieve moral and spiritual development, which they also desire. It is a path that relieves the human agent from the miseries resulting from a life of indulgence and unnecessary metaphysical hair-splitting.

## Buddha's Teachings

Buddha preferred to remain silent on metaphysical issues, as he did not consider them profitable or conducive to the highest good. This made him an ethical teacher with great insight. He opened a new path to everyone, as

it should be. Moreover, the charm of Buddha's universal teachings lies in the fact that they have issued out of his personal experience. The sight of old age, disease, and death moved him to discover some existential truths about the world, which he formulated in the doctrine of *pratityasamutpada*, co-dependent origination. *Pratityasamutpada* teaches us that in the empirical world everything is relative and conditional. All things are dependent, subject to birth and death, and therefore impermanent. Phenomena hang between reality and non-reality. It is analogous to the maya of Vedanta: neither real nor unreal. It is in this sense that Buddha called this doctrine the *madhyama pratipada*, middle path, which avoids both eternalism and nihilism. The middle path is meant to lead a seeker to a firmer grip on experience and to the discipline leading to the truth embedded in experience. With this end in view Buddha expounded the *chatvari arya-satyani*, four noble truths, to his first five disciples.

The first noble truth affirms that there is suffering. Life is full of misery and pain, and all worldly pleasures are really fraught with sorrow. The second noble truth explains that there is a cause of this suffering. Here Buddha brings in the doctrine of *pratityasamutpada*. Since everything in this world is dependent on certain other conditions, the doctrine points out that suffering springs from the tendency of the ego, impelled by ignorance, to go out of itself to seek satisfactions. The third noble truth advances



the idea that it is possible to stop suffering. It is the recognition of the possibility that if one can remove the cause of suffering, the effects are also removed. The fourth noble truth asserts that there is a path leading to the cessation of suffering. Through the eradication of ignorance and desire, nirvana can be attained. This is the Eightfold Path, which can be followed by both monastics and laypeople. It consists of right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The first discourse, the *Dharmachakra Pravartana Sutra*, setting in motion the wheel of dharma, contains the teachings of the middle path. Buddha is known to have said:

These two extremes, mendicant brothers, are not to be approached by him who has withdrawn (from the world). Which two? On the one hand one which is linked and connected with lust through sensuous pleasures and is low, ignorant, vulgar, ignoble, and profitless; and on the other hand that which is connected with self-mortification and is painful, ignoble, and profitless. Avoiding both these extremes, the middle road (*madhyama pratipada*) bringing insight, bringing knowledge, leads to tranquility, to highest knowledge, to full enlightenment, to peace. And what middle road leads to peace? It is indeed this noble Eightfold Path, namely, right outlook, right will, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right absorption. This middle road leads to peace.<sup>1</sup>

Buddha's ethical middle path is like Aristotle's golden mean, in which both self-indulgence and self-mortification are equally ruled out. Spiritual perfection can be achieved by following the path that lies between these two extremes. Buddha said: 'The middle way enlightens the eyes, enlightens the mind, which leads to rest, to knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana.'<sup>2</sup>

True, the noble eightfold path springs from Buddha's disturbing experience of worldly suffering, though it frees us from suffering. Buddha's teachings were directed to people who are subject to ignorance, desire, delusion, grief, and death. He compassionately showed that no gods or destiny were to be blamed for suffering. Through self-effort the individual can have his or her mind illumined and the heart filled with wisdom, peace, and joy. Hence, it can be said that his teachings laid stress on psychology and ethics. Buddhism also mentions a path advocating *shila*, right conduct, *samadhi*, right concentration, and *prajna*, right knowledge, which directly leads to nirvana.

### **Gita's Middle Path of Nishkama Karma**

The Gita, in its sixth chapter, emphasizes the middle path. Sri Krishna teaches: 'But, O Arjuna, yoga is not for one who eats too much or for one who does not eat at all; neither for one who habitually sleeps too long, nor surely for one who keeps awake. Yoga becomes a destroyer of sorrow for one whose eating and movements are regulated, whose effort in works is moderate, and whose sleep and wakefulness are temperate.'<sup>3</sup>

The middle path lies between *pravritti* and *nivritti*. *Pravritti* is the path of *sakama* karma or karma performed with a desire for the enjoyment of the fruits. Such karma leads to attachment and indulgence and is the cause of bondage in the never-ending chain of birth, disease, old age, death, and rebirth, as mentioned in the Buddha's doctrine of *pratityasamutpada*. The cause of desire is ignorance, and from desire springs karma. The Gita teaches that to overcome this wheel of samsara one should perform *nishkama* karma, work without desire.

*Nivritti* is the other extreme; followers of

this path renounce all worldly karmas. This path is for those who naturally do not have any inclination towards pleasures and duties and wish to lead a life of a recluse or a sannyasin. But this path has an appeal and competence only for the few. The majority follow the path of karma. Therefore, the Gita teaches the path of *nishkama* karma by following which a person can achieve spiritual perfection. It recognizes the psychological fact that not all persons are disposed to follow the path of renunciation of actions, and that most of those who follow it without having the proper conditions become hypocrites (3.6).


The Gita thus prescribes karma yoga: 'No one ever remains for a moment without doing work. For all are made to work under compulsion by the *gunas* born of Prakriti' (3.4). Sri Krishna also says: 'Karma is superior to non-karma' (3.8). Hence, to get out of the wheel of samsara Sri Krishna teaches: 'Without being attached, O son of Kunti, you perform karma for him [God]' (3.9). This is the path of *nishkama* karma. It is not negativism, asceticism, or escapism. It is a path in which karma is performed but with detachment. It is a middle path.

The Gita synthesizes both *pravritti* and *nivritti*. It can be said that the Gita is not for the annihilation of all desires, but the merging of all desires in the one supreme desire, and that is the desire for moksha. All karma should be inspired by this supreme desire.

## Conclusion

The similarity between Buddha's main teachings and the central theme of the Gita are quite obvious. In the doctrine of *pratityasamutpada* Buddha considers ignorance and *trishna*, thirst for sense objects, as the cause of bondage, suffering, and rebirth. In Vedanta too, and especially in the Gita, *avidya*, ignorance, and *kama*,

desire, are stated to be the root of bondage, suffering, and rebirth. Both Buddha and the Gita show us the path to the supreme goal of life. While Buddha calls it nirvana, the Gita calls it *brahma-nirvanam*, absorption in Brahman (5.24). Again, both Buddha's and the Gita's approach to the problems of spiritual life are definitively practical.

Considering the value of the middle path it can be said that neither too much intellectuality nor sentimentalism can be of help. Buddha used parables and illustrations to emphasize his points, as the Gita did. The building of character is stressed by both teachers, and above all it was the power of their tremendous personalities that put a stamp of authority on their teachings. This power is still undiminished and is helping release the vast mass of spiritual energy present in all people. 

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# Natha Pantha: Order of the Primordial Shiva

Dr Satish K Kapoor

(Continued from the previous issue)

BESIDES MATSYENDRANATHA and Gorakhanatha, the most distinguished exponent of the Natha order of ascetics was Jalandharanatha—called Hadipa or Hadi-pa in Bengal—a disciple of Matsyendranatha.

## **Jalandharanatha and other Nathas**

According to one tradition, Jalandharanatha was a *hāḍī*, sweeper, in the palace of the widowed Queen Mayanamati of Patika, but acquired royal status due to his miraculous powers, which he had acquired through intense spiritual practices. He infused life into the corpse of the queen's daughter Champadei and prevailed upon the queen's recalcitrant son Gopichandra to follow him. He could also make Mayanamati speak to her dead husband, Manikachandra. Another tradition has it that he is among the five Adi Siddhas, chief saints, who emerged out of the mirific ashes of Adinatha.<sup>17</sup> Jalandhar City in Punjab, mythologically named after the demon Jalandhar, is historically known because of Jalandharanatha. His memorial was demolished by Muslims to construct the Imam Nasir Mausoleum (twelfth-thirteenth century) in the heart of the old city. Jalandharanatha initiated *bandha*, a yogic lock involving contraction of the throat by pressing the chin firmly on the chest, and it came to be known after him as *jalandhara bandha*. Kanu-pa—Krishna-pada, Kana-pa—a Kapalika Shaiva poet of strong mystical leanings who had also been in contact with Gorakhanatha, was among his disciples.

Chauranginatha and Dharmanatha, disciples of Matsyendranatha; Charpatanatha and Gahininatha, disciples of Gorakhanatha; Gopichandra, disciple of Jalandharanatha; and Bhartrihari, disciple of Gorakhanatha or Jalandharanatha, were among other perfected Natha yogis who became popular among Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims alike due to their miraculous powers and austere lives. Nityanatha (fifteenth century) set new benchmarks in the science of longevity, *āyurveda*, by composing *Rasaratnakara*, the monumental work dealing with non-mercurial metallic compounds, mercurial preparations, therapeutic actions, and rejuvenating effects of such preparations. In course of time a number of *panthas*, Natha lineages, grew after the names of adepts and their disciples, often differing from one another due to regional variations or the impact of prevalent sects or creeds.

Some of the early Natha teachers came to be associated with the royal household: Jalandharanatha held sway over Hastinapura in Uttar Pradesh, the ancient capital of the Kuru dynasty; Gopichandra over East Bengal, now Bangladesh; and Bhartrihari over Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. Champadei was the spouse of the king of Bengal. Chauranginatha was the abandoned child of King Devapala of Bengal. *Prana-sankali*, a Natha text dealing with the control and regulation of the vital energy in a person, is attributed to Chauranginatha. Sahil Varma, king of Chamba, was a disciple of Charpatanatha and

is credited with the authorship of *Charpata-shataka*—or *Charpata-paddhati*—‘which shows a strong Jaina influence’.<sup>18</sup>

A sect of yogis came to be known after King Bhartrihari, who wore ‘the garments of the bark of trees’ and wandered with the name of Shiva on his lips, drawing his inspiration from ‘the murmuring brooks and the bubbling springs’. The wandering minstrels of the Natha or yogi tradition recite the songs of Bhartrihari as they play on stringed or percussion instruments, emphasizing the glory of the Divine Name, the transitoriness of the world, and the need for God realization. They wake up people in early morning hours singing soulful melodies and say *alakh nirañjan*, synonym for God without attributes, when approaching them. They wear ochre-coloured unstitched robes and remain on the move from place to place carrying a *jholā*, wide open bag, on their shoulders. They depend on alms for their daily subsistence and are against accumulating money or material goods. They are familiar with Bhartrihari’s works—*Shringara-shataka*, *Niti-shataka*, and *Vairagya-shataka*—but recite only the last one dealing with dispassion and often disregard the first two relating to love and politics respectively.<sup>19</sup> Some Nathas pay obeisance to the sage Markandeya, a devotee of Shiva who tried to conquer death, and to mother goddesses—like Amba, Shabari Devi, Vindhya-vasini, or Balasundari—or appease the *navagrahas*, nine planets, particularly Shani (Saturn) by adopting what they call *yogamaya-pujā-paddhati*, the technique of yoga-based worship. But they are few in number and do not strictly belong to the orthodox Natha sect.

### The Natha Impact

The Nathas lived in mountain-caves, dense forests, solitary places near riverbanks, or in hermitages for ascetic practices—called *ekānta* sadhana—

surviving on tubers, roots, and fruits. With the growth in their following, Natha monasteries came into existence. The first such monastery was built in the Deccan on top of the Kadri hill, overlooking the Manjunatha shrine in Mangalore, Karnataka, by Kundavarma Bhupendra of the Alupas’ lineage (tenth-eleventh century). The Nathas exchanged notes with Qalandars and Sufis like Hamidu’d-Din Nagauri (d.1274 CE) and Faridu’d-Din Ganj-I Shankar—better known as Baba Farid (d.1265 CE)—and with the Sikh Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1539). *Siddh Gosht*, a dialogue of Guru Nanak Dev with Siddhas—namely, Bhanganatha, Charpata, and Loharipa—finds an eloquent mention in Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Ramakali Mahala 1, 938–40). Some verses in *Gorakhabani* deride the Qazis for mechanically reciting the *Kalima*, ignoring its deep meaning.<sup>20</sup>

The ethical precepts of the Nathas, as opposed to the left-handed tantra ascetics, impressed eminent Sufis like Sheikh Ahmad ‘Abdu’l-Haqq of Rudauli Shariff—Faizabad district, Uttar Pradesh (352). Many liberal Muslims who concurred with Malik Muhammad Ja’isi (b. 1494–5) that Gorakhanatha and the Siddhas were like divine messengers (369), became converts to Nathism in medieval times, when Muslim rulers were harsh on the Hindus. The pontiffs of a few Natha hermitages came to be known by the Sufi epithet of Pir or Murshid, which means ‘spiritual teacher’. Muslim scholars like Sheikh Chand (c.1650–1725) and Abdu’l Hakim (1620–90) highlighted common points between Sufi and Natha beliefs. While the former wrote *Hara-gouri Sambad*—a *samvada*, dialogue, between Shiva (Hara) and Parvati (Gauri), about the secret spiritual doctrines—the latter juxtaposed yoga chakras with their counterparts in Sufism in his epic *Chari-Maqamer Bhed* (352). Shaikh ‘Abdu’l Quddus Gangohi (1456–1537), better known as Alakh, explained Natha beliefs in his



Hindi poems. Like the Nathas he emphasised that *śabda*, the divine word, is the mainstay of everything that exists and that the Sufis must 'absorb themselves in Onkar through *zikr* [recollection]'. There are six references to either Gorakhanath, Shri Gorakh, Nath, or 'O! Nath' in his *Alakhbani* or *Rushd-Nama*. He found proximity between the metaphysical beliefs of the Nathas and the Sufi concept of the unity of Being—*Wahdat al-Wuzud*—(336–9, 343). Kabir spoke highly of Natha teachers like Gorakhanatha, Bhartrihari, and Gopichandra, who were experts in *śabda-yoga*, the yoga of sound, and the technique of *ṣaṭcakra-bhedanagubhavadīyā*, the mystic knowledge of piercing the six nerve-plexuses, or *kundalini śakti*, wheels of the serpent power.<sup>21</sup>

In the Virashaiva literature, there are references to Gorakhanatha's debates with Allama Prabhu and Revanasiddheshvara.<sup>22</sup> The view that the former was humbled twice seems to be an exaggeration, since such a defeat would have caused a furore in religious circles and would have been widely mentioned in contemporary literature. Similarly, the account of Gorakhanatha's failed attempts to win over Baba Balakanatha, the child-*siddha* of Chakmoli in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, who was a disciple of Dattatreya—or Datta guru, the combined manifestation of the Hindu trinity Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—as described in some legends of North India, has a sectarian orientation. The *Khulasatu-T-Tawarikh*,<sup>23</sup> a late seventeenth century work, does not mention any meeting between Balakanatha and Gorakhanatha, as it does in the case of Baba Lal and Dara Shukoh. The Tilah of Balanatha, lying at a distance of '7 kos from the fort of Rohtas' is described in this work as 'a cave of austerities', and a meeting point of yogis during the Shivaratri festival. Another medieval text, the *Chahar Gulshan*, lists the Tilah of Balanatha

among the Hindu shrines in Punjab, but does not allude to any meeting between the Natha stalwarts. The popular claim of Nathas and Siddha yogis, as recorded in *Dabistan-i-Mazahib*, that the Prophet Muhammad was a disciple of Gorakhanatha in his form as Baba Ratan Hajji, who still has followers in Kabul, Afghanistan,<sup>24</sup> is mythopoeic and unhistorical.

Jalandharanatha and Bhartrihari strengthened the Natha cult particularly in North India, Chauranginatha in Bengal and the eastern region, Dharmanatha in Gujarat, Charpatanatha in the Himalayan region, and Gahininatha in western India. Gahininatha initiated Nivrattinatha, who in turn initiated his brothers Jnaneshvara and Sopandeva, and sister Muktabai into the religious order. Jnaneshvara proved to be the greatest saint of Maharashtra, and his kin Nivratti, Sopan, and Muktabai emerged as highly evolved souls. Together they brought about a spiritual transformation by combining the way of knowledge and the way of devotion and by regarding Shiva and Vishnu as aspects of the same supreme Reality, which can be experienced by anyone.

Prominent Natha teachers like Matsyendra, Gorakha, Chaurangi, Jalandhara, and Charpati—or Charbaripa—figure in the list of the eighty-four Siddhas of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.<sup>25</sup> Their names also find mention in the mystic tradition of Nepal. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1.5–8) provides a select list of adepts in *haṭha-vidyā*, which includes, besides the main Natha teachers, the names of Allama Prabhudeva, Ananda Bhairava, Bhanuki, Buddha, Kapalika, Kapali, Karantaka, Niranjana, Nityanatha, Tintini, Vindunatha, Virupaksha, and others. Places and spots consecrated by Nathas are scattered, even today, throughout Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, but they are mostly in bad shape

or have been encroached upon for private use. It is common knowledge that some Muslim peasants of Tripura, in north-east India, continue to revere the Natha trinity Matsyendra, Gorakha, and Jalandhara in their evening prayers. During the census of 1901 45,463 persons described themselves as Nathas.<sup>26</sup> But their number as a religious community seems to be on the decline due to change in the mental culture of people, who cannot afford to follow ascetic practices or observe strict ethical discipline.

Interest in the Siddha Siddhanta doctrine of the Nathas is, however, on the increase and, according to one survey, there are perhaps 750,000 adherents of the school 'who are often understood as Śāktas or *advaita tantrics*.'<sup>27</sup> The number of Natha ascetics is going down, as is evident from the fact that the majority of their ashramas or hermitages, at least in Punjab, wear a deserted look. The places hallowed by the presence of Nathas have become abodes of ritualistic worship rather than centres for spiritual illumination through traditional practices.

This author has noted the presence of the Natha community in a number of villages in Solapur district of Maharashtra. They are householders, proud of their heritage but ignorant of


the Natha esoteric doctrines like Shatchakra-bhedana or Kundalini-jagarana. They worship Guru Gorakhanatha and other Natha preceptors as the Varkaris worship Vitthala, and avoid meat and intoxicating beverages. They make pilgrimages to the sacred places of Shaivas and Vaishnavas alike and have little understanding of the metaphysical subtleties that distinguish the Natha doctrine from others.

The major shrines of the Nathas in Maharashtra are those of Siddhanatha at Kharsundi, Atapadi taluk, Sangli district; Bhoja-linga at Varkute, Dahivadi taluk, Satara district; Natha Baba at Karunde, near Natepute, Solapur district; Bhairavanatha at Abapuri, Satara district, and at Sonari, Paranda taluk, Osmanabad district; and Lakshmi at Manegaon, Sangola taluk, Solapur district. How could Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, enter the pantheon of the Natha yogis is not known. It appears that devotion to the goddess of prosperity has a certain local base and it does not reflect a change in the beliefs of the Nathas. It may also be an intermingling of Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions, of which we find many examples in Maharashtra and Karnataka. Natha Panthi, Nath Jogi, and Masan Jogi figure in the category of Nomadic Tribes in

*Vedic education by a  
Natha Pantha guru  
at Nath Shakti Pith,  
Maharashtra*



Maharashtra, while Jogis are included in Other Backward Castes as per Maharashtra government's list of castes.<sup>28</sup>

The Natha yogis as a separate class of religious mendicants, called Jugi in Bengal, are not held in respect today.<sup>29</sup> However, the high ideals, renunciatory outlook, and the yogic feats of the Nathas continue to be a part of the Bengali folklore and tradition. 

### Notes and References

17. 'Mina Nātha sprang from the navel; Gorakṣa Nātha came out of the skull (according to other versions, from *ghor* or filth, whether sweat or dung); Hāḍi-pā originated from the bones; Kānu-pā was born from the ears; and Caurāṅgī Nātha came out of the feet'—see 'The Nātha Cult', 282.
18. See *The Yoga Tradition, Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, 513–16; and 'The Nātha Cult', 285.
19. For an English translation of select verses of *Vairagya-shataka* see Lal Gopal Mukerji and Bankey Behari, *Songs from Bhartṛhari* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1999), 1–6. The life of Bhartṛhari is shrouded in myths and legends. Mukerji and Bankey Behari believe that Bhartṛhari flourished about the first or second century CE. He was fortunate in having for his minister his own brother, the well-known Vikramaditya, after whom we have the Vikram Era (viii). Swami Harshananda places Bhartṛhari, the author of three well-known Shatakas, 'One Hundred Verses', somewhere between 100 BCE and 500 CE—see *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, 1.285. Georg Feuerstein mentions that Vikramaditya—Chandragupta—ruled from 1079 to 1126 CE after his brother Bhartṛhari abdicated the throne—see *The Yoga Tradition*, 514. In fact, Chandragupta II belongs to a much earlier period: fourth-fifth century CE. Bhartṛhari's date requires further historical scrutiny, but the existence of Bhartṛhari, the king turned Natha yogi during the early phase of the second millennium of the Christian Era cannot be denied. Who actually wrote the popular Shatakas, whether the grammarian Bhartṛhari with Buddhist leanings who belonged to the fifth century or the one who belonged to the Natha-Bhartṛhari who emerged about six centuries later—is another question that shall remain unresolved till new facts are discovered. It may, however, be said that the Natha-Bhartṛhari lives in the soulful songs that he wrote in moments of dispassion and detachment resulting from his wife's clandestine acts of immorality.
20. *A History of Sufism in India*, 1.333, 339.
21. *The Yoga Tradition, Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, 513.
22. R Blake Michael, *The Origins of Viraśaiva Sects* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 56–7. Gorakha made a show of his adamant body, which could not be pierced by any weapon. Allama Prabhu in reply asked him to pass a sword through his body. The weapon penetrated as if it were passing through vacant space. When asked about the secret of this miracle Allama replied that 'Māyā becomes frozen as does the body and when the body and the māyā both become frozen, shadow forms appear as real, and the body and the mind appear as one' (ibid.).
23. Vide Jadunath Sarkar's translation.
24. *A History of Sufism in India*, 1.354; *The Yoga Tradition, Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, 514.
25. For the names of the eighty-four Siddhas see P C Bagchi, 'The Cult of the Buddhist Siddhacaryas' in *Studies on the Tantras*, 102–3. According to one account, the category of *navanātha*, nine Natha teachers, includes: Gorakhanatha, Jwalendranatha, Karinanatha, Gahininatha, Charpatanatha, Revananatha, Naganatha, Bhartṛnatha, and Gopichandranatha—see Bhagavataprasadsinghji, 'Caurāsi Siddha Tatha Nātha Sampradāya', *Kalyāṇa*, 'Yoganka', 468–72. The Vajrayana school of tantric Mahayana Buddhism accepts the early Natha Siddhas other than Gorakha as its own masters—see 'The Nātha Cult', 286.
26. *Gorakhnāth and the Kanphaṭa Yogis*, 23.
27. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, *Dancing with Śiva: Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism* (Hawaii: Himalaya Academy, 1993), 816.
28. See *Arakshana Sandarbhatil Mahatvache va Nivadak Shashakiya Adesha* (Kolhapur: Shivaji Vidyapitha, 1999), 180, 184.
29. 'The Nātha Cult', 280.



# Significance of the Term Putra in Vedic Literature

Kamalika Mazumder

(Continued from the previous issue)

THE ATHARVA VEDA DEALS extensively with progeny, hence the word *putra* appears repeatedly in the text.

## Putra in the Atharva Veda

The *dhātṛī*, nurse, describes how the pain of a childbearing woman disappears after the birth of an offspring and the method through which the child is born: mother and child are split apart by external aid. Here both *putra* and *kumāra*, boy, are mentioned to be set apart from the mother's womb to begin its childhood.<sup>35</sup>

The fire god Agni is invoked by the sacrificer so that Yatudhani devours her own *putrāḥ*. But here *putrāḥ* means desires, curses, and other ill thoughts, which are removed by Agni. In this case the word *putra* takes the form of a psychological consequence (1.28.4). In another hymn a totally different meaning for *putra* is given, in which the gods take the form of the father, mother, and child (1.30.2).

'This man has come, has arisen, has gone unto the *vrāta*, troop, of the living; he has become of sons the father and of *nṛ*, men, the most fortunate' (2.9.2); this is W D Whitney's translation. But the person, released by the possession of the demon, does not become merely the father of sons but the father of children in general. Agni is asked to protect people as the father protects children (2.13.1). As the mother takes the child in her lap, Mitra is asked to protect the child from distress that comes from friends (2.28.1).

In the Rig Veda we have seen that the arrow in the quiver is likened to a *putra* inside the mother. The following is an excerpt from a hymn in the Atharva Veda translated by Whitney:

Unto thy womb let a foetus come, a male one, as an arrow to a quiver, let a hero be born unto thee here, a ten months son; give birth to a male, a son, after him let a male be born, may you be mother of sons of those born and whom thou shalt bear; and what excellent seeds the bulls generate, with them do thou acquire a son, become you a productive milch-cow. ... The plants of which heaven has been the father, earth the mother, ocean the root—let those herbs of the gods (daiva) favour thee, in order to [have the] acquisition of a son (3.23.2–4, 6).

Here the foetus in the womb is desired to become a male one, as an arrow to the quiver. In the hymn there is also a longing for a *vīra*, hero, and again, according to Whitney, for a *putraste daśamāsyah*, a ten-month son. However, only the first child is desired to be a *puman*, male; all the rest are desired to be just healthy *putrāḥ*. In the verse quoted above a wish is expressed for a *pumānsam putram* to be born, and after him let a male be born again; but in future may the mother be *putrāṇo mātā*, the mother of children in general. The last two verses refer to the bull, or the male among the bovine, which generates excellent seeds and by which a productive milch cow, the woman, acquires a *putram*. The herbs of the gods should pave the way for the acquisition

of a *putra*. In this hymn the longing for a male child first followed by children in general becomes evident. The first reason may be that in the later Vedic period strong men were required for wars as well as agriculture, where heavy iron-tipped ploughs were used. These activities could be carried out more by men than by women. It may also mean that the ratio of women population was more than that of men and therefore the requirement of a male child became important. But this is not quite plausible because in marriage, though a woman is a *samrāṅni*, queen,<sup>36</sup> she could have asserted her numerical strength by remaining in her own family while the husband would have been required to come into her house, as is prevalent in matriarchal societies. Also in the Rig Veda polygamy was prevalent—a clear state of masculine lordship. Thus, in the Rig Veda many currents of thought developing through the ages are assimilated to find a common thread of life in which harmony can be established in the midst of diverse lifestyles and dicta. The *Aitareya Brahmana* clearly states that a man may have many wives, but not the opposite. This shows that as late as the period of the Brahmanas the opposite opinion was also prevalent. We do not quite know the circumstances that led, in some special cases, to the desire of a male child in the Vedic age.

Let the *putra* follow his father in *vrata*, penance, [and be] like-minded with the mother.<sup>37</sup> Agni is said to be the *putra* of the rishis who produce him (4.39.9). In another hymn the desire for a male child is expressed clearly and repeatedly: ‘*Pumānsaṁ putramā dehi*; grant (me) a male son’ (5.25.10–13). The gods are invoked in a ceremony while consecrating a new house for its protection. In one of the mantras in this hymn the Maruts are prayed for joining themselves to ‘the *chandās*, metres, at the sacrifices ... as a mother to her *putra*’ (5.26.5). As a mother is

joined and fills her *putra*, the Maruts are hailed for joining and filling the *chandās*, which is a neuter word. Thus, like the *chandās*, *putra* can also be a neutral word or a general term meaning child.

The male Ashvattha and the female Shami trees generate a *putra*, not a male offspring alone, as *pūṁsavanam* leads to the formation of the foetus (6.11.1–2). The foetus can be of either gender. The word *śami*, when used as an adjective, means one who has control over one’s passions and is peaceful. But Prajapati, Anumati, and Sinivali, who have shaped the embryo, put elsewhere the birth of a girl child and place here a male one’ (6.11.3). This is a verse to be reasoned out: Why is the male child particularly desired here? Unlike the female Shami, it is in a male that the desire to kill foes grows and becomes the cause of procreation. So, though a child is a product of both the father and mother, the Atharva Veda says in a particular mantra that the male is born out of the male—the Ashvattha comes forth from the Khadira (3.6.1). A male acquires more of the propensity to smite the foes. So, the act of slaying men is physically and psychologically an easier task for the male than the female. Even in this ambience, where women sometimes also used to go to war, the term *putra* meaning child in general shows the open-mindedness of the chanters of these hymns.

The female Shami is leaf laden, brings good fortune, is rain fed, and gets an epithet of truth. The tree is entreated to increase and grow its *keśa*, leaves, as the mother brings up her children, *putrebhyaḥ* (6.30.6). Here *keśa* and *putra* are compared to each other. That a person or a *putra* can have both the feminine and masculine instincts within oneself is recognised by the term *kavirya putra*, the wise child, who transcends gender-consciousness. Through nature this child understands that *raśmi*, rays, are both

feminine and masculine. It gradually becomes one with Aditya, who is the source of all knowledge. Its vision becomes totally metaphysical. In another hymn the rays of Aditya—traditionally considered to be feminine because they hold water—are said to be masculine due to their bestowing rain (9.10.15). That the self can become both masculine and feminine is realized by the *kavirya putra* of the rays, which is the water that is *put*, procreated, out of the rays, and in turn *tra*, saves, the earth. The inner meaning is that the wise child alone knows that the rays of the sun, denoting the self, can be of any sex, and the child becomes its father's father because of possessing wisdom. The father is one through whom the procreation commences. If the rays are the father of water, the father of the rays is, in turn, Aditya, the all-knowing being. As the wise child can be of either sex, *raśmi*, or its father, is also its mother. But finally the rays are called as father only, recalling more the cause of procreation than other aspects of masculinity. So, the wise *putra*, that is water, and Aditya become one in this context. Neither the rays nor Aditya are mentioned in this verse. What is stated is that the feminine takes up the masculine function. The wise child also becomes one with the 'father's father', in this case Aditya—the cause of procreation on the earth. The *putra* becomes the 'father's father' because in this hymn the paternal lineage is stated. But Aditya is also said to be the seventh *putra* of Aditi, the Supreme Mother, and he has been visualized by the sage in the famous mantra starting with *asya vāmasya*. H H Wilson explains 'seven sons' as the seven solar rays. It may also be rendered as the seventh son Aditya, being the seventh son of Aditi.<sup>38</sup>

The feminine also contains the masculine aspect, and it was realized that like the rays, the self of a person can take either of the (seven) colours at different moments. Likewise, *putra* could take

the feminine and masculine forms at different instances. We have seen before that though a male god, Agni is summoned as *dvāra devi*.

*Svapna*, dream or sleep, is personalized in a hymn as a goddess, to function as the exterminator of bad dreams: 'You who are not alive, not dead, immortal-embryo of the gods are you, O sleep; Varunani is your mother, Yama your father; Araru by name you are. We know your place of birth (*janitra*), O sleep; you are the *putra* of the gods' sisters, agent of Yama; end-maker are you; death are you; so O sleep, do we comprehend you here; do you, O sleep, protect us from evil-dreaming.'<sup>39</sup>

Dreams are the first offspring procreated by the gods that are manifested in the world and its system. Just as the *putra* takes birth, so a dream is born and ultimately takes the form of death. The whole creation is also likened to a dream. In the well-known *Trisuparna* mantras occurs the prayer: 'Suppress the dreary dream of the empirical existence that I experience.'<sup>40</sup>

For the expiation of wrong deeds a hymn to Agni pleads to free the father, the child, and the mother from the *pāśa*, clutches, or ties of evil-doings,<sup>41</sup> which in the later verses is called *pāpa*, sin. The hymn suggests that even after committing wrongdoings there is atonement for the father, the child, and the mother. Here *putra*, like in other instances, clearly indicates the child, because there is no separate word in the Vedas for a daughter. *Svarga*, heaven, is the place where good-hearted people who undertake good sacrifices or karma go and enjoy; it is a place where people in general would like to go. A hymn expresses this wish: 'Where the well-hearted, the well-doing revel, having abandoned diseases of their own selves, not lame in their limbs, undamaged in heaven (*svarga*) there may we see (our) parents and *putrān*, children' (6.120.3). A wife prays so that her husband, who went afar, can



return and the children be in their father's company once again (6.131.3). The *putrāḥ* in these instances generally denotes children.

The term *putra*, which assimilates within it both the genders, sometimes goes beyond any gender-oriented meaning and is remarkable for its spiritual overtones. For example, in the 'Atma Suktam', Atharva rishi says: *sa*, 'that' or 'it', knows the *putra*, knows the father (Brahman), knows the mother (Prakriti), and becomes the *sunu*, son (7.1.2). In another hymn similar to the one found in the Rig Veda: 'Aditi (is) heaven, Aditi atmosphere, Aditi mother, she father, she son; all the gods (are) Aditi, the five races; Aditi (is) what is born, Aditi what is to be born' (7.6.1). Aditi is then applied in a narrower meaning of being the mother of her *putrāḥ*, the devas, for whom the unconquerable Arnava, sea, is snatched away from the *putrāḥ* of Diti and thrown away (7.8.1). Aditi cooks a Brahman-rice-dish that is given

as oblation to Brahman, who is hailed for the desire for children (11.1.1). In the Vedas the natural desire for children is praised on the part of the mother. As the father enters the procreated *putra*, so *prāṇa*, which here means Virat, Cosmic Person, is the womb not just of devas but of humankind, of herbs, of the sun and the moon, and so on. Through its own power *prāṇa* enters into everything that exists. Thus, the ever-existent *prāṇa*, the inherent womb, manifests itself as the world, its *putra* (11.4.20). In this verse the term *putra* contains the entire time—past, present, and future—including all living beings and non-living things.

As the mother covers her own child with the hem of her cloth, the earth is required to protect the dead (18.2.50). Here the child with its mother is used as a simile, which is compared to a dead person in the lap of the earth. Both are harmless and cannot protect themselves. They



are content in resting under the protection guaranteed by the mother. In a hymn for the after-life rituals of a dead person honey is mixed with water, and that sweet water is considered by the *putra* and *pautra*, grandchildren, as their nutrient once the oblation was given to the ancestors (18.4.39).

Kala, time, is the father of this universe and exists in the form of its *putra* (19.53.4). Kala is omnipresent in all things and is the cause of the manifestation of the universe; it has procreated the *putra*, creator, who is *para*, transcendent, belonging to the other world. Thus, from the gross material level of the birth of a *putra* the Atharva Veda takes us higher and higher to a level where *putra* is not only a human child but is time itself, encircling the whole universe and belonging to a state where gender-consciousness is transcended (19.53.2).

The god Agni enters the organs of the worldly fire, ignited through attrition. That Agni is the *putra* of the rishis (4.40.9) who recite the mantras at the time of attrition of two pieces of wood. It may also mean that Agni is the *putra* of Atharva Angira rishis. The word *putra* here clearly gives a human dimension to Agni, because it is the mantras or the seers of the mantras themselves that are the cause of the birth of Angira Agni. Agni is actually procreated from the mind of the seer, wherein the mantras already exist. This mantra or knowledge was manifested in the physical discovery of Agni from amidst the woods. Agni thus enters the physical fire, enlivening and putting consciousness into it. Thus, *ṛṣiṇām putro*, the child of the rishis, assumes a philosophical dimension. In the 'Garbha-dhana Suktam' it has been said that: 'May Tvastar tie the hand-clasp that Aditi wore when desiring a *putra* saying, "may she give birth to a *putra*"' (6.81.3). A preceding verse in this hymn is translated by Whitney as the 'placing of the embryo'

in the womb: 'him do thou make to come, thou comer *maryadā*, giver of a male' (6.81.2). His translation also indicates that *putra* may mean a male child in particular. This also shows that as *putra* means child the word male was necessary for expressing the pointed desire for a male offspring.

The father and child are often linked together in similes, as in a hymn that says: 'May the preaching of the learned provide all boons for us, as a father provides for his child again and again from morn to morn' (10.6.5). That Self is proclaimed as: 'You art woman, you [art] man, you boy, or also girl; you, when aged, tottered with a staff; you, when born, become facing all ways' (10.8.27). The Ashvattha tree, the Darbha grass, the Soma plant, rice, and barley—the immortal oblations—are also highly healing balms that nourish like the *divasputrāḥ*, children of the sky, the gods (8.7.20). *Divasputra*, a term repeated many times in the Rig Veda, actually means enlightened beings or the dwellers in the lighted spheres. A hymn carries a prayer wishing the chanters to dwell in the world happily with their wives and children (12.3.17). In a verse of this hymn God is asked to embrace the chanters as the father clasps his children (12.3.12).

Some of the instances where the term *putra* is used in the Atharva Veda have been cited above. In this Veda one finds that there was an admixture of a variety of thought currents and cultural differences within the Aryan fold. The prayer for a male offspring along with the desire for *prajā*, which like the word *putra* means children in general, becomes louder in the Atharva Veda.

### Putra in the Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita

At the time of the Yajur Veda *putra* still meant child, but according to some the distinction between the male and the female offspring gradually became more evident.

There is a hymn in this Veda in which the *dampati*, couple, by their sacrifices, obtain a *pumān putra*, male offspring, who would obtain wealth and grow at home.<sup>42</sup> In this Samhita we also find a verse explaining why Agni is specifically called *sahasasputra*: ‘O Agni, Angirasa discovered you the time you lay hidden, fleeing back from wood to wood. You, by attrition, are produced as conquering might, and men, O Angirasa, calls you *sahasasputra*, the *putra* of power’ (15.28). Heavenly bliss is desired not only for those who perform rituals, but for the wife, the children, and the brother as well, going to the plane beyond sorrow (15.50). While the mother feeds the child, it playfully kicks the mother; but the *pitara*, father and mother, are never hurt (19.11). The *pitara*, fathers, are asked to provide wealth to the children—possibly the children of the sacrificer (19.63).

In another hymn the twin Ashvins are said to nourish and protect Indra as parents protect the child (20.77). Here the word ‘parents’ denotes both father and mother, according to some, but in the former hymn it is translated as the ‘fathers’ (19.63). If mothers did not have the power to offer wealth to their children, it has to be supposed that they did not possess wealth anymore, which they used to have at the time of the early Vedic period. It is argued that the only riches mothers possessed was what they received at the time of marriage, which later came to be known as *stridhana*, wife’s wealth. A hymn in the Krishna Yajur Veda Samhita suggests that women are powerless, have no inheritance, and speak more humbly than even a bad man.<sup>43</sup> But here, in the word *putra* lies the secret of the ideal male and female unity—philosophical, social, and economic unity. In the Shukla Yajur Veda we find an instance where the wife accompanies the husband in battle.<sup>44</sup> A goddess is said to be as powerful as a lion-

ess, able to bestow wealth upon her worshippers (5.10). Here again the word *putra* indicates that even then daughters obtained wealth from their fathers or parents.

According to some scholars, the entire Vedic society was patriarchal in nature. In the Rig Veda and in other parts of the Vedic literature also the desire for a male offspring is mentioned separately. But in a hymn in the Shukla Yajur Veda Samhita a desire is expressed for obtaining a *yoṣa*, woman, endowed with qualities (22.22). Goddesses like Sarasvati, Parvati, and Aditi were held in the highest esteem. For example: ‘Aditi is the heaven. Aditi is mid-air, Aditi is the Mother and the Sire and son’ (25.23). The gods are said not to take away the life of the worshippers so that they can see their *putrāḥ* become *pitara*, parents (25.22). Like in the Rig Veda, in the Yajur Veda too the prayer for a male offspring, along with *rayim*, wealth, can be found in the horse-sacrifice hymn (25.45). ‘As the mother takes the *putra* to her bosom, so let the bowstring take the arrows for slaying enemies’ (29.41). Echoing a verse in the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda also describes the quiver as a *putra* (29.42). As the mother takes the *putra* in her lap, so also Aditi is asked to place Agni at the centre of the fireplace (11.57).

(To be concluded)

## References

35. Atharva Veda, I.11.5–6.
36. Rig Veda, 10.85.46; Atharva Veda, 14.1.43.
37. Atharva Veda, 3.30.2.
38. Rig Veda, 1.164.1; Atharva Veda, 9.9.1.
39. Atharva Veda, 6.46.1–2.
40. *Mahanarayana Upanishad*, trans. Swami Vimalananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1997), 222. Also see Rig Veda, 5.82.4.
41. Atharva Veda, 6.112.2.
42. Yajur Veda, 8.5.
43. Yajur Veda, 6.5.8; *Shatapatha Brahmana*, 4.4.2.13.
44. Yajur Veda, 11.50.

# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



***Vedanta: A Religion,  
a Philosophy, a Way of Life***  
Swami Atmarupananda

Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1946 Vedanta Place, Hollywood, CA 90068. Website: [www.vedanta.org](http://www.vedanta.org). 2011. xiv + 106 pp. \$ 9.95.

Vedanta is not just a philosophy, eastern or western, but a comprehensive way of life. It transcends all historical religions and yet embraces humanity all over the world, for it is based on universal principles. “Those who search for higher truths find solace in Vedanta, irrespective of their religion.”

Vedanta literature is vast, and most persons are at a loss while proceeding with Vedanta studies. For all such readers the present book by Swami Atmarupananda of the Ramakrishna Order is an excellent primer. Here ten chapters are spread over seventy-six octavo pages. The titles of the first four chapters are: ‘What is Vedanta?’, ‘Four Main Principles’, ‘Karma, Dharma, and Rebirth’, and ‘Schools of Vedanta’. Subsequent chapters deal with gurus, avatars, social issues, and the Ramakrishna tradition.

The author has understood the basic needs of students of Vedanta and has explained lucidly all that they would like to know. The book has two appendices: one presents a list of books a beginner would find useful, the other displays a glossary with many Vedantic terms elaborately explained.

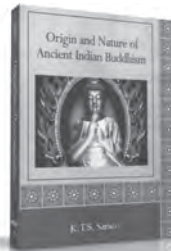
The author brings in its compass the living tradition of Vedanta as elucidated by Swami Vivekananda during his brief lifespan. Subsequently, the monks of the Ramakrishna Order, founded by Swami Vivekananda, have widely spread those principles.

The book is pithy but not tough. This is due to

the lucid style of the author and his love for the aspirants.

*N B Patil*

Hon. Prof. of Sanskrit,  
Ananthacharya Indological  
Research Institute, Mumbai



***Origin and Nature of  
Ancient Indian Buddhism***  
Dr K T S Sarao

Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers,  
PO Box 5715, 54 Rani Jhansi Road,  
New Delhi 110 055. Website: [www.mrmlbooks.com](http://www.mrmlbooks.com). 2010. xv + 217 pp. ₹ 495.

A very graphic picture of ancient India as recorded in the Buddhist scriptures comes to light by an eminent and learned author. Buddha and Buddhism were products of the times. The use of iron, the position of women, an increased commercial activity, skills and production by artisans, and religious movements, were, among others, factors that characterized the origins of Buddhism.

Before the advent of Buddha there was a mass exodus of the rural population towards the flourishing urban centres. This vast energy converging to the cities gave rise to problems peculiar to every city, as it is even in our times. On the other hand, the stable rural population did not remain idle; there were, for example, considerable clearings of forests in the Indo-Gangetic belt and an increase in the production of food. Traditional life was being undermined by all these changes and there was unrest in the air. At that juncture Buddha appeared in the social and religious scenario of India.

Buddha’s peregrinations and sermons took place mainly in or around cities and among the material and intellectual elite. But Buddhism spread all over Asia not only due to Buddha’s personality and doctrines, but also due to this energy of the people—an energy that was translated



into a missionary zeal through psychology, philosophy, and ethics. Most of the arguments on ancient Indian society by the author have been taken from the Pali *Tripitaka* texts, and what a wealth of information they contain apart from the Buddha's doctrines!

The book under review is a moving picture of ancient India and the rise of Indian Buddhism, its strengths, schisms, disputes, and above all its powerful movements. In seven chapters and seven appendices one finds details never before attempted in a systematic way. Dr K T S Sarao has gone through each line and word of the Pali texts and has shown in tabular form several important historical aspects as the frequency of rural and urban settlements and the male and female personalities of that time. This is one of those research books that may prove worthy in a library with sections on Ancient Indian history and Buddhism.

PB



### **War on Sacred Grounds**

Ron E Hassner

Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.  
2010. xvii + 222 pp. ₹ 695.

**T**he title of the book epitomizes the persistent problems faced by religions and societies today. Ideally, one cannot or should not wage war or fight on sacred grounds, but ironically, the author has shown that sacred grounds all over the world have sparked conflicts caused by fanaticism as well as political and religious interests. However, these intractable problems can be solved with political, social, and religious intelligence, for everyone wants peace, not war on sacred grounds.

Ron E Hassner has analysed conflicts with the help of three current approaches: materialism, interpretivism, and constructivism. He suggests that while their respective methodologies are contrasting, they are not contradictory. The author has a long experience in the field of political science and puts forward the idea that to resolve wars fought over sacred sites all three approaches must be combined to thus obtain a better insight into the minds of the different people involved.

Conflicts over sacred space are not just between religions, but even between sects of the same religion. Sacred space is where devotees assemble to commune with the Divine and to achieve deeper insight about themselves and their respective faiths. This very quality of the space makes devotees exclude others as they feel it will desecrate the place. But the military, political, and religious leaders, as well as sometimes the process of institutionalization, weave a complex explanation that leaves things more confused.

Because of their *centrality* in the religious landscape, sacred grounds are very *vulnerable*. Managing sacred grounds thus requires great co-operation from all sectors of society. The author has wonderfully shown the glaring mistakes committed till now and goes over the history and psychology of conflicts to present some useful solutions.

This remarkable book is a must for those interested to know why a humble worshipper becomes a rabid howling fanatic when he or she encounters others encroaching over 'their' sacred space.

PB

## **BOOKS RECEIVED**



### **Swami Nirmalananda**

Swami Vishadananda

Tulasi Books, Block 149, Bishan Street  
11, #08-17, Singapore 570149. 2010.  
578 pp. ₹ 300.

**T**his voluminous book is a reprint of *Swami Nirmalananda: His Life and Teachings* published in 1943. Swami Nirmalananda was a unique monk who tirelessly spread the message of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda in South India. A learned monk with indefatigable energy and organizational capacity, even till his last days, he was instrumental in establishing on a permanent basis many ashramas dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna.

# REPORTS

## News from Branch Centres

On 1 June 2011 Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated a building at **Vivekananda Ashrama, Shyamla Tal**, to be used for library, office, and miscellaneous purposes.

**Ramakrishna Math, Ulsoor**, has completed its rural educational service activities for the academic year 2011–12. For the last 8 years the centre is distributing notebooks, dictionaries, stationery, and other study materials to school children studying in government primary and high schools and rural coaching centres. Children are also taught prayers and general hygiene and are introduced to Swami Vivekananda's teachings. This year the distribution of items started on 8 June and benefited 15,130 students of 144 selected schools and pre-university col-



*Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj inaugurating a building at Shyamla Tal*

leges as well as 19 rural coaching centres situated at 131 remote or backward villages of Pavagada, Madhugiri, Hoskote, Kanakapura taluks.

The foundation stone for the proposed new prayer hall at **Ramakrishna Mission, Port Blair**, was laid on 15 June.

In October 2010 Swami Vivekananda College, Fiji, pioneered an eLearning project by setting up a 140 computer intranet with multimedia based educational software. Recognizing the need to support primary and secondary schools, **Ramakrishna Mission, Fiji**, has embarked on a computer literacy project to acquire used and ex-leased computers from educational institutions and organizations in both Australia and New Zealand. These computers are distributed for free to as many primary or secondary schools as possible. The centre is being supported in this venture by the Sydney, Auckland, and Brisbane chapters of Serve Fiji Foundation as well as other institutions and individuals. On 17 June the first lot of 118 computers was distributed by Dr Brij Lal, permanent secretary of education, to 11 institutions, some of which are in remote places in the Yasawas and Vatukoula.

## *Rural education service activities by Ulsoor Math*



**Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, conducted a summer camp from 1 to 31 May for children in the age group 8–15. About 380 children took part in the camp, which included, among other activities, yoga exercises, narration of the lives and teachings of the Holy Trio and other saints, drawing, spoken Sanskrit, bhajans, and Vedic chanting.



*Dramatic performance at the summer camp in Chennai Math*

### Achievements

Kunal Chawla, a hostel student of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh**, secured the 20th rank in all-India Engineering Entrance Examination.

BSc (Honours) students of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur**, and **Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, Vidyamandira, Belur**, secured the following all-India ranks—within the first ten—at the joint admission test for MSc courses in the various Indian Institutes of Technology. Narendrapur: 4th in Statistics and 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 7th in Chemistry. Vidyamandira: 1st and 6th in Mathematics, 1st in Physics, and 6th and 8th in Chemistry.

### Relief

**Flood Relief** • Recent incessant rains caused flood in some parts of West Bengal. The following centres started relief activities among the victims. **Belgharia** distributed 11,016 kg chira, 1,102 kg sugar, 48,960 biscuits, 122 kg cornflakes, 244,800 halogen tablets, 150 kg bleaching powder, and 60 kg lime to 1,224 flood-affected families belonging to five villages of Daspur I block in Paschim Medinipur district.

**Narendrapur** distributed 205 tarpaulin sheets, 511 home kits (each kit containing soap bars, cotton cloth, nylon cord, bucket, candles, and other items), 2,385 jerry-cans, 9,850 ORS packets, and 125,200 NaDCC / Chlorine tablets among 6,980 flood-affected families belonging to 53 villages of 8 blocks in Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur districts.

**Distress Relief** • **Rahara** centre distributed 9,000 kg rice, 3,600 kg dal, 118 kg mustard oil, and 75 kg salt to 1,517 needy families.

**Fire Relief** • **Rahara** centre distributed 1,000 kg rice, 75 kg dal, 75 kg mustard oil, 75 kg salt, 15 mats, 15 bed-sheets, 15 mosquito nets, and 4 kg milk powder to 15 families whose houses were gutted by fire in Bajarberia village of South 24 Parganas district. The centre also distributed 2 kg mustard oil, 1 mat, 1 bed-sheet, and 1 mosquito net to a fire-affected family in Sandeshkhali block of North 24 Parganas district. ❧

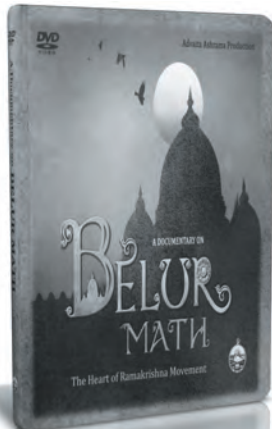
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**Correction** • June 2011, p. 441: read 'We do not want to go by the Altekarian paradigm of a glorious Vedic society' for 'We do not want to go by the antiquarian paradigm of a glorious Vedic society'; July 2011, cover photo: read "'Stillness" by Larry Bickford' for "'Journey to the Sea" by Larry Bickford'.



# BELUR MATH

A DOCUMENTARY



This documentary chronicles the beginnings of Belur Math, the heart of the Ramakrishna movement. In a style at once informative and engaging, this film records the unfoldment of the headquarters of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Containing footage of historic value, much of it brought to the public for the first time, this is a must have for those who wish to know about this organisation and also for those who are ardent students and admirers of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition.

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